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# **AN EXPLORATION OF MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES AROUND FEEDBACK PRACTICES ON ASSESSED WRITING IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

**R. Jane Cobb**

**BA (Hons), PGCE, MA**

Centre for Research in Education and Educational Technology

**Doctorate in Education**

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# ABSTRACT

This thesis explores feedback practices around assessed writing in Higher Education from three perspectives: students, tutors and the institution. The study is motivated by my belief as an experienced tutor practitioner that recognition of these three key perspectives in the feedback process is of pedagogical importance.

Feedback on assessed writing emerges as a concern throughout the literature and amongst colleagues. Empirical studies and pedagogical discussions around feedback practices tend to focus on one perspective, usually students', sometimes tutors', with both framed implicitly within institutional interests. Moreover, much research appears to present issues around feedback as a 'problem' that needs resolving. This thesis seeks to offer an exploration of the perspectives of key participants around feedback practices informed by work in Academic Literacies (Lillis and Scott, 2007), through research drawing on ethnographic principles.

The thesis is based on one cohort of a second-year undergraduate linguistics module within The Open University (OU), a large UK distance learning institution. It uses data generated from questionnaires, semi-structured interviews and official documentation.

I explore the data using a heuristic of Bakhtin's dialogic approach to language and communication (see Bakhtin, [1934/35], 1981:272; 278-80). I relate Bakhtinian notions to the potentiality of dialogic student-tutor feedback practices, the perception of authoritative voices and the potential for agency within an assumed hierarchically structured institution and I foreground the range of influencing voices surrounding the feedback process.

Findings indicate the multiplicity of voices involved in the feedback process, besides the limitations to the potential for dialogic tutor-student feedback practices within the context of the conflation of summative and formative assessment and the complexity of hierarchical relationships. These findings, together with an operationalisation of Bakhtin's theories, are of professional value to educators in deepening understanding of the nature of feedback around writing in Higher Education and in reconsidering feedback practices.

## **DEDICATION**

I want to dedicate this thesis to the memory of Peter Crofts (dad). He set an example by studying for his degree within one of the first OU cohorts, working on our kitchen table amongst family chaos.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Producing this thesis has involved a lengthy journey and along the way there have been many special people who have advised, supported, encouraged and distracted me. I have been most privileged to have had the benefit of the constant wisdom and expertise of my supervisors, Professor Theresa Lillis and Dr Ann Hewings. I am so grateful to them both for staying with me and for the many hours they have committed to providing their much-valued constructive advice and suggestions. I thank the research participants for giving their time so willingly. I have been fortunate to be amongst the warm and supportive academic community at the OU and thank, in particular, Barbara Mayor and Jackie Tuck. Special thanks are due to June Ayres for her seemingly effortless problem solving and constant support. I have valued the friendship of OU students and colleagues, especially Penny, Michelle and Brett and fellow traveller, Madeleine and have appreciated their “keep going” and “get on with it” texts and emails. Finally, of course, I am grateful to my family - Jeremy, for his taken-for-granted practical and emotional support, and Thomas and Ellen for widening my horizons with their full and interesting lives and, of course, for ensuring that I don’t take myself too seriously.

# LIST OF CONTENTS

<b>Abstract</b>	<b>iii</b>
<b>Dedication</b>	<b>v</b>
<b>Acknowledgements</b>	<b>vi</b>
<b>List of figures</b>	<b>xiv</b>
<b>List of tables</b>	<b>xv</b>
<b>Acronyms</b>	<b>xvi</b>
<b>Chapter 1: Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
1.1 Introduction	1
1.2 Rationale for study	2
1.2.1 Beginnings	2
1.2.2 Context	4
1.2.3 Aims	9
1.2.4 Pedagogic concerns	9
1.3 Research questions	11
1.4 The focus of this thesis	12
1.4.1 Exploring multiple perspectives	12
1.4.2 Feedback practices	12
1.4.3 Assessed writing	14
1.4.4 The Higher Education context	14
1.5 The writing of this thesis and difficult decisions	14
1.6 Thesis organisation	16
1.7 Summary	17
<b>Chapter 2: Literature</b>	<b>18</b>
2.1 Introduction	18
2.2 'Feedback': definitions and interpretations	19
2.3 Feedback research: rationale	21



2.4	Feedback research: foregrounded perspectives	23
2.4.1	Introducing perspectives	23
2.4.2	Student perspectives	24
2.4.3	Tutor perspectives	29
2.4.4	Institutional perspectives	33
2.4.5	Exploring feedback from three perspectives	36
2.5	Feedback research: 'problem/solution' approach	37
2.6	This study's contribution	45
2.7	Summary	46
<b>Chapter 3: Developing an exploratory framework</b>		<b>48</b>
3.1	Introduction	48
3.2	Language and communication and feedback practices	49
3.3	Building a Bakhtinian-informed heuristic	57
3.3.1	Why Bakhtin	57
3.3.2	Language and communication as 'dialogic'	58
3.3.3	Authoritative voice and internally persuasive discourse	60
3.3.4	Heteroglossia	65
3.3.5	A Bakhtinian-informed heuristic	67
3.4	Summary	70
<b>Chapter 4: Methodology and Methods</b>		<b>71</b>
4.1	Introduction	71
4.2	Aims of the investigation	71
4.3	Methodological framework	72
4.4	Designing the study	74
4.4.1	Introducing the design	74
4.4.2	Questionnaires	75
4.4.3	Interviews	81
4.4.4	Other data sources	83
4.4.5	Summary: multiple data sources	84
4.5	Process of data collection	86
4.5.1	The participants: sample, scope and scale	86

4.5.2	Participants as group representatives	95
4.5.3	Other data sources	95
4.5.4	Overview of data collected	97
4.6	Data analysis	99
4.6.1	Introducing the data analysis	99
4.6.2	Questionnaires	100
4.6.3	Interviews	100
4.6.3.1	Approach to transcription	104
4.6.4	Other data sources	105
4.7	Ethical considerations	107
4.8	Researcher positioning	109
4.9	Summary	111
<b>Chapter 5: Student perspectives around feedback practices</b>		<b>113</b>
5.1	Introduction	113
5.2	Student participants	114
5.3	Exploring student perspectives around feedback practices using a Bakhtinian-informed heuristic	119
5.3.1	Language and communication as dialogic: <i>To what extent is the interaction that exists around feedback practices dialogic (in Bakhtinian terms)?</i>	119
5.3.2	Authoritative voice and internally persuasive discourse: <i>To what extent are particular voices perceived as authoritative and what evidence is there of the development of internally persuasive discourse?</i>	130
5.3.3	Heteroglossia: <i>Are there a range of voices that influence participants' perspectives around feedback practices?</i>	139
5.3.3.1	Voices influencing perspectives on academic writing (Ivanič, 2004)	151
5.4	Summary	158

<b>Chapter 6: Tutor perspectives around feedback practices</b>	<b>163</b>
6.1 Introduction	163
6.2 Tutor participants	164
6.3 Exploring tutor perspectives around feedback practices using a Bakhtinian-informed heuristic	165
6.3.1 Language and communication as dialogic: <i>To what extent is the interaction that exists around feedback practices dialogic (in Bakhtinian terms)?</i>	165
6.3.2 Authoritative voice and internally persuasive discourse: <i>To what extent are particular voices perceived as authoritative and what evidence is there of the development of internally persuasive discourse?</i>	174
6.3.3 Heteroglossia: <i>Are there a range of voices that influence participants' perspectives around feedback practices?</i>	185
6.3.3.1 Voices influencing perspectives on academic writing (Ivanič, 2004)	189
6.3.3.2 Time and feedback	192
6.4 Summary	194
<b>Chapter 7: Institutional perspectives around feedback practices</b>	<b>198</b>
7.1 Introduction	198
7.2 Central academic participants	199
7.3 Exploring institutional perspectives around feedback practices using a Bakhtinian-informed heuristic	200
7.3.1 Language and communication as dialogic: <i>To what extent is the interaction that exists around feedback practices dialogic (in Bakhtinian terms)?</i>	200

7.3.2	Authoritative voice and internally persuasive discourse: <i>To what extent are particular voices perceived as authoritative and what evidence is there of the development of internally persuasive discourse?</i>	205
7.3.3	Heteroglossia: <i>Are there a range of voices that influence participants' perspectives around feedback practices?</i>	214
7.3.3.1	Voices influencing perspectives on academic writing (Ivanič, 2004)	218
7.4	Summary	223

<b>Chapter 8: Discussion and Conclusion: Multiple perspectives around feedback practices</b>		<b>227</b>
8.1	Introduction	227
8.2	Exploring perspectives around feedback practices using a Bakhtinian-informed heuristic	228
8.2.1	Language and communication as dialogic: <i>To what extent is the interaction that exists around feedback practices dialogic (in Bakhtinian terms)?</i>	228
8.2.2	Authoritative voice and internally persuasive discourse: <i>To what extent are particular voices perceived as authoritative and what evidence is there of the development of internally persuasive discourse?</i>	232
8.2.3	Heteroglossia: <i>Are there a range of voices that influence participants' perspectives around feedback practices?</i>	235
8.2.4	Multiple perspectives	237
8.2.5	The question of time	241
8.2.6	The value and limitations of the Bakhtinian heuristic	243
8.3	Pedagogical and professional implications	244

8.3.1	Implications of realist findings	244
8.3.2	Implications of interpretivist findings	246
8.4	Limitations of the study	248
8.5	Future research	254
8.6	Closing reflection	255
8.7	Summary	257
<b>References</b>		<b>258</b>
<b>Appendices</b>		<b>267</b>
<b>Appendix 1: Research questions (for ease of reference)</b>		<b>269</b>
<b>Appendix 2: Focus and research interests of the literature reviewed (in Chapter 2)</b>		<b>270</b>
<b>Appendix 3: Student perspectives: data collection</b>		<b>273</b>
3.1	Student participants: age range	273
3.2	Student participants: gender	274
3.3	Covering email invitation to students to participate in the questionnaire	275
3.4	Student questionnaire	276
3.5	Semi-structured interview script: students (with rationale)	283
3.6	Standard student cohort demographics (available from University registration)	286
3.7	Student interviewees: full profiles	287
<b>Appendix 4: Tutor perspectives: data collection</b>		<b>292</b>
4.1	Request to tutors to participate in research (email)	292
4.2	Request to tutors for permission to retain and refer to online forum contributions	293
4.3	Template email to tutors who had agreed their participation	294
4.4	Request to tutors to include personal details (email)	295
4.5	Tutor questionnaire	296
4.6	Semi-structured interview script: tutors	301

<b>Appendix 5: Institutional perspectives: data collection</b>	<b>303</b>
5.1 Central academic: questionnaire	303
5.2 Central academic: semi-structured interview script	307
<b>Appendix 6: Ethical issues</b>	<b>310</b>
6.1 Data protection questionnaire: response	310
6.2 Student Research Project Panel (SRPP): decision	311
6.3 Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC): approval	312
<b>Appendix 7: Student questionnaire: analysis of closed questions</b>	<b>313</b>
<b>Appendix 8: Semi-structured interviews:</b>	
<b>transcription key and decisions</b>	<b>316</b>
<b>Appendix 9: Sample interview transcription: John</b>	<b>317</b>
<b>Appendix 10: Samples of official documentation</b>	<b>335</b>
10.1 Sample assignment task	335
10.2 Marking criteria/grid	337
<b>Appendix 11: Ivanič's (2004) six discourses underpinning approaches</b>	
<b>to academic writing</b>	<b>338</b>
<b>Appendix 12: 'Academic writing' question and responses</b>	<b>339</b>
12.1 Transcription key: academic writing responses	339
12.2 Semi-structured interview question: academic writing	340
12.3 Responses from students	341
12.4 Responses from tutors	345
12.5 Responses from central academics	348

# LIST OF FIGURES

<u>Figure 1.1</u>	Representing perceived hierarchical relationships between participant groups and how these relate to the feedback process	8
<u>Figure 5.1</u>	Student questionnaire sample: preferred and actual medium for feedback discussion and its initiation	122
<u>Figure 5.2</u>	Student questionnaire sample: University's categorisation of reasons for study	142
<u>Figure 5.3</u>	Student questionnaire sample: importance of subject content as reason for study	142
<u>Figure 5.4</u>	Student questionnaire sample: guidance received other than from a tutor	144

## LIST OF TABLES

<u>Table 3.1</u>	A Bakhtinian-informed heuristic for exploring perspectives around feedback practices	69
<u>Table 4.1</u>	‘Helpful’/’unhelpful’ feedback: sample questionnaire/ interview questions	80
<u>Table 4.2</u>	Intended data sources, mapped against research questions	85
<u>Table 4.3</u>	Student interviewees: biographical details	89
<u>Table 4.4</u>	Tutor participants: biographical details (as supplied by themselves)	92
<u>Table 4.5</u>	Central academic participants: roles and responsibilities	94
<u>Table 4.6</u>	Data collected and analysed in this thesis	98
<u>Table 4.7</u>	Analytical tool: official documentation (based on Angelil-Carter and Murray, 2006:20-25)	107
<u>Table 5.1</u>	Student questionnaire: ‘helpful’ feedback	126
<u>Table 5.2</u>	Student questionnaire: ‘unhelpful’ feedback	127
<u>Table 5.3</u>	Evidence of awareness of discourses around academic writing (Ivanič [2004:225]): students	154
<u>Table 6.1</u>	Evidence of awareness of discourses around academic writing (Ivanič [2004:225]): tutors	190
<u>Table 7.1</u>	Evidence of awareness of discourses around academic writing (Ivanič [2004:225]): central academics	219



# ACRONYMS

<b>BERA</b>	British Educational Research Association
<b>HE</b>	Higher Education
<b>HREC</b>	Human Research Ethics Committee
<b>OU</b>	The Open University
<b>SRPP</b>	Student Research Project Panel
<b>UD</b>	University demographics (regarding students on their registration)

# **CHAPTER 1**

## **INTRODUCTION**

### **1.1 Introduction**

I begin by explaining why I wanted to explore what I consider to be the three main categories of perspectives around feedback on assessed writing within Higher Education (HE): perspectives of students, tutors and the institution. The institutional perspective in this thesis is explored by paying attention to the views of ‘central academics’, those with a responsibility for curriculum and assessment and tutor appointments, with some consideration of written official documentation. I explain why I chose the practice of feedback around assessed writing as the focal point for this exploration (1.2). I describe the context within which I researched as an ‘insider’ (1.2.2), the aims of my study (1.2.3) and its pedagogic importance (1.2.4). This introductory chapter then identifies my research questions (1.3) and explains the focus indicated by my thesis title (1.4). I offer a reflexive account of the writing of this thesis, setting out my reasons for the way I decided to organise my data analysis in Chapters 5, 6 and 7 (1.5). Finally, I present a brief overview of my thesis (1.6).

## 1.2 Rationale for the study

### 1.2.1 Beginnings

My particular pedagogical interest in exploring the complexities of multiple perspectives around feedback practices on assessed writing stems from my tutoring experience. I have worked for some 18 years at The Open University (OU). The OU is a major distance learning provider of HE, with currently (2019) over 170,000 students and claims to be a pioneer of “flexible learning” (The Open University, 2019).

Undergraduate courses within this University are termed ‘modules’<sup>1</sup>; these span one academic year and carry points towards a full degree and are categorised as Levels 1-3, generally corresponding to Years 1-3 within a traditional University degree. I have worked with students on some eight different distance learning modules, all of which involved me in the role to which I refer throughout this thesis as a ‘tutor’, that is as someone responsible for facilitating and delivering this service by working directly with students on their learning. Particularly important for initiating this study on which this thesis is based are my experiences of tutoring on an introductory course for mostly mature students new to HE, alongside tutoring second and third-year modules, all within the OU.

The introductory module had been developed within the context of widening participation, to introduce students new to academic study at this level to both subject knowledge and academic study skills (O’Day, 2011:7), including the requirements of academic writing (page 218). Inbuilt, then, was a high level of individual student support, comprising detailed written tutor feedback on formative assignments,

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<sup>1</sup> From here onwards, the term ‘module’ is used

supplemented by a scheduled, individual student-tutor telephone discussion, in preparation for a final summative assessment. I experienced, within these one-to-one telephone tutorials, that any mismatch between student and tutor expectations could be debated and then progress measured, jointly, by student and tutor, against mutually agreed learning targets.

I became aware that students' assumptions, expectations and perspectives about feedback generally appeared to be influenced by sometimes competing, sometimes supportive, 'voices'. I am using 'voices' to refer to those traces of discourses from past experiences, persons or ideas which seem to be influential in participants' perspectives on feedback (discussed further in 3.3.4). Examples of such 'voices' include people in social and family networks, previous educational experiences, professional contacts, and, perhaps the most apparent 'voice' in my experience, students' expressions of their reasons for study, which sometimes did not match my prior expectation or that which appeared to be assumed within the module design (The Open University, 2011a), that is, to secure a qualification. For example, students sometimes wanted to experiment with writing an academic essay or, often, expressed interest in the subject content only, rather than aiming for a qualification. I saw the formative focus on academic study and writing skills of this introductory module as more akin to the work of writing centres, as described by Harris (2001; 1995), which consider interaction over feedback within an isolated setting, claimed as a "haven" (Harris, 1995:27), except that this introductory module blended subject content and academic writing tuition. More recently, there has been a strong tradition, in a range of national contexts, of building writing pedagogy into disciplinary pedagogy (Lillis *et al*, 2015). At the time, I felt that the introductory module at the OU offered a specialised, exceptional context within the U.K., in that it seemed to involve both an opportunity for tutor and student engagement which

facilitated tutors' understanding of student perspectives and a module design inclusive of writing pedagogy. The implications of such a model merited further attention.

This led to an interest in exploring the ways in which academic writing tuition was nested in the other more traditionally-structured second and third-level modules that I was experienced in teaching. In these modules, tuition on academic writing, it seemed, was constituted by only written feedback, as specified within institutional documentation (The Open University, 2012a). Whilst, occasionally, such feedback was supplemented via email, telephone and at (optional) face-to-face group tutorials, it was not unusual throughout a traditional module to have no two-way contact between a tutor and a particular student. Although I did have limited glimpses of student perspectives, a scheduled opportunity to explore such perceptions within the feedback and assessment context did not exist. Whilst written feedback within the traditional modules contained much formative advice, its focus was summative assessment. I perceived that such conflation influenced both student and tutor perspectives around feedback practices and perhaps made ongoing dialogue, valued pedagogically as an 'end' in itself, difficult.

These contrasting experiences, then, led me to decide about the context within which I wanted to research and to formulate the aims of my study and my research questions, discussed below.

### 1.2.2 Context

I decided that I wanted to focus my exploration of perspectives around feedback practices on assessed writing within the context of the more traditional discipline-based

modules in the OU, where summative and formative assessment are combined within feedback that both evaluates and feeds forward to the next assessed submission or to final assessment. These modules do not contain a separated, formative element, intended to teach the requirements of academic writing (as in the introductory module to which I referred above) and, as such, seemed to represent the majority of HE provision within the U.K., a situation described by Lillis and Scott (2007:13) as the “everyday business of disciplinary study”. I wanted to research perspectives within the context of apparent everyday pressures, not least of time, deemed by Carless *et al* (2011:396) to be “the greatest pressure on students, module teams and tutors alike, throughout HE”.

In order to focus my study, I decided to select one cohort of a second-year English Language module within the OU, to which all participants and documentation involved in generating data would belong, so helping to confine and control my data, as explained further in 4.5.1. This module, entitled, *Worlds of English*, a compulsory component of the OU’s Language and Literature degree, was first made available to students between February and October, 2012; I selected this first cohort as the basis of my study.

As I was a tutor on this particular module, I considered that being an ‘insider’ researcher (Hellowell, 2006) might prove advantageous in exploring perspectives. However, I recognised, too, that I needed to interrogate my assumptions, made as ‘insider’, which became a theme of my investigations (see 4.8) and which I critically revisit in Chapter 8.

In considering which perspectives were essential to explore in order to understand feedback practices within this context, three distinct participant groups emerged clearly in terms of their allocated roles within the feedback process. These comprised those

who study and pay for tuition (students), those who facilitate and deliver a pedagogical service by working directly with students (tutors) and those who design and write the module and monitor the process of its delivery and assessment, manage staff and appoint tutors (central academics). This last category of central academics, representing institutional perspectives, is problematic, not least because no single group can be representative of an institution and because of the diverse nature of the institutional roles of the particular participants who took part in the study, as discussed in 4.5.1 and 7.2. However, I considered it necessary to include participants who had a more obviously central institutional role within this particular context of HE, as designers of curriculum and assessment and management and appointment of tutors, and so most closely bound to institutional norms, as a key way of capturing institutional perspectives, essential for understanding the range of perspectives around feedback practices. Institutional perspectives were additionally represented by consideration of brief extracts from official documentation. I therefore collected three distinct sets of data, relating to these three categories of perspectives.

Initially, when considering these seemingly distinctive perspectives, students, tutors and the institution, I assumed that there might be an inherent hierarchy - of fixed authority - within the process of interaction around feedback practices. Within this hierarchy, students would be at the lowest level, as their writing was graded by tutors, according to criteria specified by central academics. However, I came to understand this apparently straightforward hierarchy as more complicated for a number of reasons. Firstly, students, particularly within the context of government funding considerations and increases in their HE fees, might be perceived as having more power when construed as 'customers', who pay for their tuition and, therefore, whose satisfaction is important within this commercially defined context. Indeed, students' opinions within

satisfaction surveys are indicated as significant in motivating research into feedback practices generally (O'Donovan *et al*, 2016; Court, 2014; Maggs, 2014). Secondly, a complication of an apparently simple hierarchical relationship between the three categories of perspectives is that students are invited to complete anonymous reports on tutors' performance towards the end of a module presentation, which are then included on tutors' records<sup>2</sup>. Thirdly, institutional authority, which is presumed to 'cascade' via central academics to tutors and students, does not always stem direct from individually identified 'central academics' but can be seen as encoded within documentation, deriving from different sections of the institution (discussed in 4.5.3). The relationship between the three categories of perspectives is, therefore, more complex than I had originally envisaged. [Figure 1.1](#) summarises these complex hierarchical relationships and how they relate to the feedback process around assessed writing.

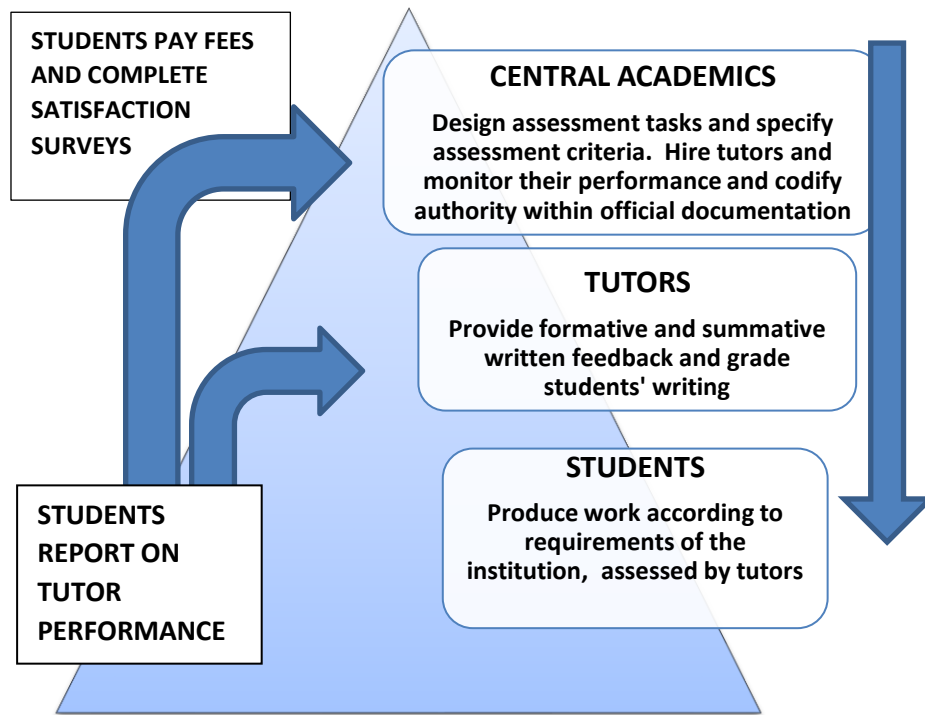
The nature of hierarchical relations within HE and their complexities are considered in relation to empirical research around feedback (in 2.5), explored with regard to my data (in 5.3.2, 6.3.2 and 7.3.2), and are then discussed in terms of pedagogical implications in my final chapter.

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<sup>2</sup> I understand that this process is being amended currently.



Figure 1.1: Representing perceived hierarchical relationships between participant groups and how these relate to the feedback process



### 1.2.3 Aims

My main intention when beginning my research was to explore three key stakeholder perspectives around feedback practices on assessed writing within a discipline-based HE context and, in so doing, to address an area considered both of pedagogical importance and concern. Dawson *et al* (2019:25) join other researchers in recent years in labelling feedback as potentially, “one of the most powerful influences on student learning”. Yet feedback on assessed writing is also an area of growing pedagogic concern, specifically, it seems, within the context of widening participation (Scott, 2014; Carless *et al*, 2011; Wingate, 2010; Lillis, 2003), in which University admission becomes more open and diverse. From my own tutoring experience of some 18 years, the time taken and effort made to produce ‘effective’ feedback on students’ writing was an important issue amongst colleagues, a concern evident, too, throughout the literature (Chapter 2).

### 1.2.4 Pedagogic concerns

I envisaged that my study would contribute to pedagogical debates in several ways, including: exploring perspectives without imposing solutions to identified ‘problems’; considering multiple viewpoints, rather than a single dominant one; incorporating wider influences on participants’ approaches to feedback from outside the assessment context. The work of Bakhtin became central to theorising these different orientations towards feedback and to the development of my study overall (Chapter 3).

I focused on a non-judgemental exploration of perspectives, in line with an ethnographic approach (see 4.3), so that I might suggest pedagogical implications,

whilst recognising that any such might still be rooted in evaluation, resting on normative criteria (Cameron, 1995:223-5). I perceived that often studies tended to start from a 'problem solving' approach, motivated by identification of some aspect of dissatisfaction with the current feedback situation. For example, Carless *et al* (2011:395) cite increasing evidence that suggests feedback is "not fit for purpose" and propose a contribution towards the "reconceptualization of feedback processes". There is much consideration of an apparent gap between feedback given and used, such as by Dawson *et al*, 2019, Jackson and Marks, 2016 and Scott, 2014, discussed further in 2.5.

Such perceived problems tend not be explored from the perspectives of all key participants but, rather, from a single dominant perspective, that is mainly from the viewpoint of one of the three key perspectives identified, usually students, sometimes tutors but often with underpinning institutional interests (see 2.4). My approach to research is of importance pedagogically because of its goal of exploring feedback from the perspectives of three key perspectives: students, tutors and institutional, the latter being represented by central academics and an analysis of brief extracts from official documentation. The thesis is informed by work in Academic Literacies (Lillis and Scott, 2007; Lea, 2004; Lea and Street, 1998), such as in challenging a deficit approach to student writing and drawing on ethnographic principles.

Alongside my concern to investigate perspectives from three sets of participants, I searched for a heuristic which would facilitate an understanding of perspectives around feedback practices. I then developed an interest in Bakhtin's 'dialogic' ([1934/35], 1981:278-80) approach to language and communication, to which the concept of perception is "crucial" (Thesen, 2006:154), in that the individual's view is "unique to her place in the world". This endorsement of the importance of individuals'

perceptions, influenced by their unique histories and contexts, underpins my own attempt to explore, focus on and value participants' perspectives surrounding feedback practices on assessed writing.

The ways in which the investigation of my research questions is framed within a Bakhtinian heuristic are explored further in Chapter 3. My research questions are set out below.

### **1.3 Research questions**

This section states my research questions, which focus on the exploration of the three identified key perspectives. (They are also included in *Appendix 1*, for ease of reference.)

- 1. What are students' perspectives around feedback practices on assessed writing?**
- 2. What are tutors' perspectives around feedback practices on assessed writing?**
- 3. What are the institution's perspectives around feedback practices on assessed writing?**

On the basis of the three empirical research questions, my aim was to explore two further questions:

- 4. To what extent are there multiple perspectives around feedback practices on assessed writing?**

And I include a reflection question, which addresses the pedagogical relevance of my study:

**5. What are the implications of the findings for the teaching and learning of discipline-based assessed writing?**

These questions are considered in relation to my review of empirical and pedagogical investigations into feedback (Chapter 2), my development of a Bakhtinian heuristic (Chapter 3), my research design (Chapter 4), my presentation of findings (Chapters 5, 6 and 7) and my discussion and conclusion chapter (Chapter 8).

Next, I explain the rationale underpinning the concepts in my thesis title and their significance for the focus of this study.

## **1.4 The focus of this thesis**

### **1.4.1 Exploring multiple perspectives**

As discussed (1.2.2), my concern was to investigate the experiences around feedback from three key perspectives of students, tutors and the institution (represented by central academics and official documentation) and in so doing to explore the extent of multiple perspectives.

### **1.4.2 Feedback practices**

Definitions of ‘feedback’ and what is labelled as ‘feedback’ on assessed writing vary amongst studies. For example, Scott (2014:49 and see 2.2), accepting that there is no widely agreed definition of feedback, reports an assumption that feedback comprises:

“something staff provide for students”. Moreover, it seems evident that the definition and categorisation of ‘effective’ feedback is likely to depend on what is valued both by participants in the feedback process and by academic researchers and writers, considered further in 2.2.

For the purposes of my research, I consider ‘feedback’ to refer to **any oral/written tutor comments as part of formative/summative assessment on student writing**.

For the institution in which this research was undertaken, the OU, ‘feedback’ on assessed writing tends to refer to on-script comments and their summary within an electronic form, completed in prose (*html* format) by tutors as a commentary on each piece of students’ assessed work, allocating a grade out of 100. Assessment is based on marking criteria (The Open University, 2012a; *Appendix 10.2*), as specified by central academics and communicated to tutors and students. No details are provided within official documentation about what the nature of the interaction around assessed writing should be, other than to specify instructions concerning the completion of feedback, but students are advised to contact their tutors with any queries:

“If you feel that you need further clarification of these comments...you should contact your tutor as soon as possible”

*Assessment Guide*, (The Open University, 2012a)

I initially considered, based on my tutoring experience, that this electronic form could either be treated as dialogue, that is as two-way communication (a response to a student’s writing and inviting a comment, question or discussion in return, if wished), or, alternatively, could be (and often was) viewed as one-way, from tutor to student. A key aim of my study was to explore the nature of communication around feedback and I adopted the phrase ‘feedback practices’ to signal this interest.

### 1.4.3 Assessed writing

The focus on perspectives around feedback practices in this study centres on assessed writing, as, whilst formative tutor feedback might have concerned a range of academic-related activities within the context of this studied module, such as timeliness of assessment submission, the only institutionally required feedback was that concerning summatively assessed writing (The Open University, 2012a). The term ‘assessed’, rather than ‘academic’ writing is therefore used in this thesis. However, perceptions of what is expected and valued as academic writing are fundamental to my study, as suggested above (1.2.4), and are explored in 5.3.3.1, 6.3.3.1 and 7.3.3.1.

### 1.4.4 The Higher Education context

The context for the focus of my study was one cohort of a second-year module at the OU. This entire cohort comprised 1156 students and 43 tutors (The Open University, 2012c). 52 students, five tutors and three central academics participated in this research (4.5.1; [Table 4.6](#)). The usual practice within this institution is that approximately twenty students are allocated to one tutor, who holds optional face-to-face tutorials, moderates an online forum for this tutor group and provides both formative feedback and summative grades on students’ six assessed written assignments.

## **1.5 The writing of this thesis and difficult decisions**

In addition to 18 years of tutoring and engaging with feedback, I have been researching and writing about feedback for some eight years, as a part-time EdD student. During

this period, I came to understand more about key participants' perspectives on feedback around assessed writing. I also became concerned about what seemed like a lack of attention to and conflicting ideas about what we actually mean by 'feedback' and in particular 'dialogue', a term often used in the literature when discussing feedback (see Chapter 2).

My research journey, therefore, involved me in two key interrelated strands of activity. Firstly, as anticipated, this involved me learning about existing relevant research and pedagogical discussions in carrying out my own explorations of the perspectives of key participants in the feedback process, including the nature of interaction around feedback. This research initially led me to adopt a survey method which allowed me to treat feedback as something 'given', that is as something we all know about through our experience as tutors and students, and to ask apparently straightforward questions, such as, "Have you ever discussed assignment feedback with your tutor on this module?" (questionnaire, see *Appendix 3.4*). However, I was always clear that I would need an additional method for exploring perspectives about what people felt and understood about feedback practices and the interview afforded me this opportunity. Secondly, and perhaps more surprisingly, my journey involved me seeking out a theoretical framework that would enable me to dig deeper into the meanings of a term that seemed to be used a lot in the literature, 'dialogue', as a way of engaging more fully in an exploration around feedback practices. This strand of activity took me to the works of Bakhtin, which was both a challenging but exciting experience, as it involved me in an unexpected depth of the theoretical/philosophical study of language and communication.



My three data chapters (5, 6 and 7) reflect what I have come to see as two key ways of engaging with an exploration of perspectives on feedback: as realist and interpretivist (for example, see Lather, 1991). The first involves treating feedback as a social and material reality, as something that exists and that participants in an important sense 'know', have experience in and can meaningfully comment on. The second involves treating feedback as something that we can only come to understand through exploration, the meanings of which need to be interpreted, using theoretical tools; the key theoretical tool used in this thesis is the work of Bakhtin, as I explain in Chapter 3. My data analysis chapters draw together the realist alongside my more interpretivist stance in the way I use data, within an overarching interpretivist, that is Bakhtinian, framework. It has been complicated to navigate the two stances within this overarching framework, but I think the way I have approached my data in chapters 5, 6 and 7 represents my attempt to engage fully with explorations of feedback in HE.

## **1.6 Thesis organisation**

Following this introduction, Chapter 2 reviews empirical studies and pedagogical discussions relating to student, tutor and institutional perspectives around feedback on assessed writing and considers concerns these uncover. Chapter 3 explains the rationale for choosing a Bakhtinian-informed heuristic for my exploration of perspectives around feedback practices and explains key conceptual terms. Chapter 4 sets out the research questions, describes the research process, explains this study's approach to data analysis and considers the ethical issues involved and my position as an 'insider' researcher. Chapters 5, 6 and 7 present my findings, a chapter being devoted to each of the three key perspectives, of students, tutors and the institution.

Chapter 8 draws together a discussion of findings and insights from the previous three data-based chapters and considers the potential implications for pedagogy and professional development. I then reflect on the limitations of my study, leading to suggestions for further investigations. Finally, I include a reflection on my experience of producing this thesis.

## **1.7 Summary**

This chapter described the origins of my interest and the rationale for my study in relation to its research context, aims and pedagogical value (1.2). It then introduced my research questions (1.3) and explained my interpretation of concepts surrounding the focus of my thesis (1.4). I then reflected on the writing of this thesis and about difficult decisions I made (1.5). Finally, I outlined the organisation of my thesis (1.6).

My next chapter reviews the concerns and findings of empirical research and pedagogical discussions around feedback practices on assessed writing.

# CHAPTER 2

## LITERATURE

### 2.1 Introduction

This chapter comprises a review of existing writing research pertinent to the specific focus of this thesis, the exploration of key perspectives around feedback practices on assessed writing in HE. All literature reviewed concerns both an HE context and feedback practices but assessed writing is not consistently foregrounded, although it is nearly always implied. *Appendix 2* summarises the explicit focus and research interests of the literature reviewed in this chapter. I begin this chapter by outlining definitions and interpretations of ‘feedback’ within the context of its increasing interest to empirical and theoretical researchers (2.2) and I consider the rationale for their interest (2.3). As discussed (1.2.4), it appears that investigations tend to be undertaken from one dominant perspective, usually, ostensibly, that of the student. Relating specifically to my three research questions (1.3; *Appendix 1*), I then consider how far recent empirical research foregrounds the three key perspectives I identified in 1.2.2, of students, tutors and the institution, including the extent to which all three perspectives are recognised (2.4). Emerging from the literature review is the suggestion that a frequent impetus for research and pedagogical discussions around feedback practices is to solve a perceived problem and I therefore review areas of concern and outline the solutions proposed (2.5). In concluding this chapter (2.6), I identify the contribution of this thesis to empirical research on perspectives around feedback practices on assessed

writing and explain the rationale for choosing a Bakhtinian-informed heuristic against which to frame this study's data.

## **2.2 'Feedback': definitions and interpretations**

Whilst there seems to be consensus amongst researchers that feedback is of central pedagogic importance within HE (Dawson, *et al*, 2019; Hughes *et al*, 2015:1079; Adcroft and Willis, 2013:804), there appears to be no widely accepted definition of 'feedback' (Scott, 2014:49). 'Feedback' is used to refer to interaction between tutors and students in relation to pedagogy in general. For example, Carless *et al* (2011:396), researching amongst 'award-winning' tutors in Hong Kong, cite Askew and Lodge's (2000) definition of feedback as "all dialogue to support learning in both formal and informal situations". A similar, apparently straightforward, broad definition is initially offered by Taylor and da Silva (2014:795), in their study of students' perspectives of feedback effectiveness, who define feedback as being

"a mechanism to support learning, whether formally or informally, in either a formative or summative manner."

They then present what they consider to be a more specific and useful definition, quoting Ramaprasad (1983):

"Feedback is information about the gap between the actual level and the reference level of a system parameter which is used to alter the gap in some way" (in Taylor and da Silva, 2014:795).

The “actual level” equates to the “students’ performance” and the “reference level” the expected standard. Taylor and da Silva (2014:795) are concerned with feedback effective enough to address this gap. (Feedback effectiveness is further discussed in 2.4 below.) Therefore, Taylor and da Silva (2014) appear to be placing feedback as measurable against institutionally-set targets.

With specific regard to feedback around assessed writing, it is possible to discern a range of interpretations, assumptions and uncertainties in the literature about feedback’s role and function. Cane (2009), in her reflective study of how distance learning students based in continental Europe learn from feedback on writing, considers its multiple functions, including advice on assignment choice and explaining grades. Price *et al* (2010), in their three-year study, focusing on student engagement with feedback on writing in business schools, found the measurement of feedback effectiveness to be “fraught with difficulties” (page 277), claiming that the feedback process is complex “and nebulous in nature” (page 287). Tuck (2013; 2012), in her ethnographic study of UK HE teachers’ experiences of feedback on student writing, discovered that what tutors count as providing feedback is actually quite diverse and notes the tension between feedback as assessment (marking) and as a formative response to help students progress. Scott (2014:49) posits that a concept of feedback is “left implicit” by researchers. In her search for a student-centred definition amongst four focus groups of 33 undergraduates in the Faculties of Arts and Social Sciences and Law in New South Wales, Scott found that, whilst students’ perception of feedback is restricted to comments on assignments, some students incorporated within this all aspects of presentation of feedback, such as its timeliness and one student perceived as part of feedback the body language of the tutor physically presenting it (page 51).

Overall, it appears that ‘feedback’ is used variously in the literature and might include **any oral/written tutor comments as part of formative/summative assessment on student writing**. ‘Feedback’ was defined as such (1.4.2) for the purposes of this thesis; this definition is selected to encompass and not to limit exploration of the range of perspectives that might be encountered within the study on which this thesis is based.

## **2.3 Feedback research: rationale**

Whilst definitions of the nature of feedback vary, there seems to be a clear consensus, alluded to above, of the prime importance attached to feedback within HE, and this importance is presented in the literature as justification for investigating feedback practices (Crimmins *et al*, 2016:141; Jackson and Marks, 2016:532; Pereira *et al*, 2016:7; Taylor and da Silva, 2014:794; Wakefield, *et al* 2014:253). O’Donovan *et al* (2016:938) summarise in their exploration of literature around feedback practices on assessed writing: “feedback is potentially the most powerful and potent part of the assessment cycle”. However, they then highlight the significance of “potentially”, because feedback seems to be failing to engage students, being, according to research evidence, “part of the assessment cycle that...we generally appear to be the worst at delivering” (page 939). Such apparent failure seems to be widely acknowledged. Scott (2014) was inspired to investigate what students recognised as feedback on their writing when she found that staff who put much time and effort into providing feedback were not scored highly for this on student satisfaction surveys. Crimmins *et al*’s (2016:153) project investigating new feedback strategies was “in response to the shortcomings of current assessment feedback practice”.

This mounting concern around feedback practices is identified specifically in the literature within the context of widening participation (Adcroft and Willis, 2013; Carless *et al*, 2011; Nicol, 2010; Wingate, 2010), in which University admission becomes more open and diverse, with increasing numbers (Nicol *et al*, 2014:103). Li and De Luca (2014:378), for example, in their review of 37 empirical studies into feedback provided on undergraduates' written work in various disciplines, refer to "students from different writing backgrounds" as one constraint limiting what is referred to as effective feedback (see 2.4.1 and 2.5).

Student dissatisfaction with feedback, reported as "publicly highlighted" (O'Donovan *et al*, 2016:939) by the UK National Student Survey since 2005, is stated as a further justification for investigations around feedback practices (Pitt and Norton, 2017:499; Court, 2014:327; Maggs, 2014; Nicol *et al*, 2014:102; Wakefield *et al*, 2014:253). Carless *et al* (2011:395) cite National Student Surveys that have indicated feedback to be "one of the most problematic aspects of the student experience" and Nicol *et al* (2014:102) summarise survey results in the UK and Australia which "consistently show that students are less satisfied with feedback than with any other feature of their courses".

The root of such problems with feedback tends to be perceived by empirical researchers and within pedagogical discussions as the nature of specific feedback processes. Nicol *et al* (2014:102) argue that the "natural response" has been to attempt to enhance teachers' feedback provision, an approach they deem as "well meaning" but seemingly ineffectual. Their research is into student perceptions of the learning benefits around feedback receipt and production from peers, relating to a first-year project which involved students producing a document describing a product design specification. It seems that investigations around feedback practices thus appear to either explore the

nature of the perceived problems, and/or promote a particular pedagogical solution (see 2.5). Some studies, for example (Hughes *et al*, 2015; Wakefield *et al*, 2014; Bloxham and Campbell, 2010 and see *Appendix 2*), report evaluation of a system they have devised to solve a perceived feedback problem, such as Wakefield *et al*'s (2014) Essay Feedback Checklist.

Summarising, much of the literature seems to adopt a research rationale of accepting feedback as both of fundamental importance, yet as a fundamental problem, what Nicol *et al* (2014:102) label, "a troublesome issue in Higher Education". O'Donovan *et al* (2016:945) conclude:

"The dilemma of the difference between theoretical benefit and the practical failure of many of our current feedback practices is more than disappointing."

The problems and solutions both identified and suggested by researchers are discussed in 2.5. Below, I consider the extent to which empirical research and pedagogical discussion around feedback practices are undertaken from the three key perspectives I identified (1.2.2): students, tutors and institutional, relating specifically to my three research questions (1.3; *Appendix 1*).

## **2.4 Feedback research: foregrounded perspectives**

### **2.4.1 Introducing perspectives**

One concern of the literature has been to identify what is often referred to as 'effective' feedback (Price *et al*, 2010). It seems evident that definition and categorisation of



‘effective’ feedback is likely to depend on what is valued by the different participants in the feedback process but filtered through the underpinning values of researchers.

However, academic discussion, pedagogic recommendations and empirical research tend to approach feedback from one dominant perspective, ostensibly, students’.

I, therefore, begin my review of the extent of the literature’s focus on participants’ viewpoints with a primarily chronological overview of studies which foreground students’ perspectives, before proceeding to the perspectives of tutors (2.4.3) and of the institution (2.4.4).

#### 2.4.2 Student perspectives

As mentioned above, student perspectives appear to be the focus of the majority of studies around feedback practices, although Weaver (2006), for example, considers this area under-researched and Pereira *et al* (2016) in their large-scale study (see below) argue that more empirical work is needed on students’ perception of teaching and learning. Indeed, Scott’s (2014:49) study focuses on students’ perspectives of feedback in the belief that these have been neglected. Yet, concern about student perspectives, allegedly prompted in the UK by National Student Surveys, as suggested (2.3), is declared as the motivation for some research and pedagogical discussions.

Studies ostensibly (in that they state or imply strongly focus on student perspectives around feedback practices) foreground a range of student-related concerns, from gaining an in-depth understanding of students’ experience and their valuing of the feedback process to developing and testing a strategy for improved feedback practices. These concerns are evident in the mainly chronological review of empirical studies and pedagogical discussions below (and see *Appendix 2*).

Young's (2000) study examines (mature) students' feelings on receiving feedback about their essays and finds that variations in reaction to feedback are linked to self-esteem and that for some students this affected their "whole sense of self" (page 409). Weaver's (2006:381) qualitative and quantitative study, within the context of an Art and Design module, is particularly student-centred and explores student perspectives of written feedback, citing Maclellan (2001 in Weaver, 2006:380-1) who suggests that learning occurs when feedback is enabling and not only judgemental. Weaver (2006:380) remains empathetic with students' viewpoints, recommending students are advised on understanding feedback before they can engage with it:

"until we more fully understand the views and responses of students, education cannot hope to be truly student-centred".

Granville and Dison (2009:53), in describing a Johannesburg case study of one student's progress in writing within an Academic Literacies course, suggest that students should have more space to reflect, so growth of understanding can be fostered to enhance engagement with feedback requiring, "the active engagement of students' themselves". Price *et al* (2010:277 and see 2.2, above), argue for what they term the "pedagogic literacy" of students, so that they can recognise feedback benefits but conclude that judgement of feedback effectiveness is best left to students themselves. Wingate (2010), researching the impact of formative feedback on academic writing amongst first-year undergraduates, aims to "shed light on students' inclination to use feedback" and finds that feedback when utilised by students had a positive effect on writing, measured by grade improvements. Adams and McNab (2012) examine how undergraduate students on arts and humanities courses experience assessment feedback, finding correlation between clear goals and student satisfaction. Court

(2014:342) explores the potential of a drafting/redrafting process, so testing the value of formative feedback to improve students' writing skills, advocating "more inclusive" assessment practice. Li and De Luca's (2014) review (see 2.3. above) explores students' (and others') wide-ranging perspectives around assessment feedback. Maggs (2014) investigates student-staff satisfaction with assessment feedback, focusing on recommendations around student demands concerning quantity and timeliness. Nicol *et al* (2014), in advocating peer evaluation as a route to student empowerment, appear to approach their "rethinking" (page 102) of feedback practices from students' perspectives. Scott's (2014) use of four focus groups (see 2.2) to discover how students define assignment feedback consistently values students' viewpoints. Taylor and da Silva (2014), surveyed 725 students in Australia studying across disciplines, including English and Creative Writing, to present students' perspectives on feedback effectiveness. They found personal feedback beneficial and individual written comments to be most useful. Wakefield *et al* (2014), in exploring student perspectives around feedback on essay-based writing, see feedback being valuable for students' "future and alternative work" (page 253) and they devised an Essay Feedback Checklist for student use before essay submission. They used focus groups comprising 104 second-year undergraduates to ascertain the effectiveness of their checklist; effectiveness was measured by assignment grades. Hughes *et al* (2015) aimed to devise their feedback checklist along lines derived from students' perspectives. Shields' (2015) exploration of emotional responses, relating to how students collect feedback, focuses almost completely on the student experience. Crimmins *et al* (2016:141), designing a strategy to enhance "student/teacher relationships", seem to be concerned primarily with the failure to "fully support student learning" and to "engage" students with feedback on their assignments (page 150). O'Donovan *et al's* (2016) scholarly

review of relevant feedback literature appears to be from students' perspectives. Pitt and Norton (2017) conducted in-depth interviews with 14 final-year undergraduates, exploring why assessment feedback was not acted upon, finding emotional reactions to feedback on written work significant and that "emotional maturity appears to underpin the processing of grades" (page 513). Steen-Utheim and Wittek's (2017:18) case study of dialogic feedback on written assignments amongst Norwegian undergraduates aims to explore how learners engage in feedback practices, investigating "feedback dialogues" between students and tutors.

The depth of and commitment to focus on student perspectives within these studies varies, indicated by approaches towards methodology, underpinning research goals and suggestions of imposed 'solutions'. For example, Pereira *et al's* (2016) study involved 605 undergraduates from five (Portuguese) universities, yet their methods of eliciting students' perceptions around feedback was via questionnaires alone, which did not allow for in-depth consideration of their perspectives. Similarly, student perspectives were considered through quantitative analysis of questionnaire responses only by Maggs (2014). Steen-Utheim and Wittek (2017) in their interaction analysis between tutors and students, do not ask for students' accounts of their own perspectives. Carless *et al* (2011) highlight the need for students to self-regulate but their interview data is from tutors. Hughes *et al* (2015) appear to speculate around students' views, rather than drawing on empirically robust data. Wingate (2010) analyses students' reasons for engaging with feedback, seemingly without dwelling on their perspectives.

Assumptions made around student perspectives, including motivations, are filtered through a focus on institutionally-set targets, such as Granville and Dison's (2009:53) advocacy of student reflection within an Academic Literacies course to "integrate what

is taught in relation to the expected learning outcomes” and Adams and McNab (2012:36) aim to “help programme teams evaluate whether learning outcomes are being achieved”. Several studies suggest what students ‘should’ do or should be trained to do, to make feedback effective. Suggestions have even included withholding grades until students read and assimilate written feedback comments (Jackson and Marks, 2016:545; O’Donovan *et al*, 2016:944; Taras, 2003 in Duncan, 2007). O’Donovan *et al*, (2016:939) see this ostensibly authoritative approach as one method of encouraging student “agency”. Nicol *et al* (2014:112; see 2.3, above) and Nicol (2010:514), in contrast to a top-down model of requiring students to engage with feedback, advocate peer feedback as a strategy, emphasising the cognitive benefits for students, such as the development of critical thinking. Whilst Nicol *et al* (2014) and see 2.3, above) do elicit students’ own views around feedback practices which appear backgrounded in some other studies, as discussed, their method requires the institution to construct and introduce a strategy to “move students away from” (Nicol, 2010:514) dependency on a tutor, and, as such, seems, to an extent, to be managed by an authoritative voice.

In summary, it appears that, whilst student perspectives have been the primary focus in research on feedback, the data available is rather limited; some researchers (for example, Hughes *et al*, 2015) base their claims on speculation to an extent, rather than analysis; some researchers engage in only a limited way with student perspectives, for example, based on survey data only, such as Pereira *et al* (2016), as discussed above. Of course other researchers, empathetic with students’ perspectives, such as Weaver (2006), Scott (2014) and Shields (2015), are committed to exploring their perspectives in more depth, locating these within the broader context of students lives’, including previous educational and work experience (for example, Pitt and Norton, 2017). It is in

this latter tradition that I locate my thesis and the specific methods I use are discussed in Chapter 4.

### 2.4.3 Tutor perspectives

Fewer studies appear to have been undertaken from tutors' perspectives. Bailey and Garner (2010) and Tuck (2012) argue that most research has foregrounded the viewpoints of students, including national surveys, a preoccupation which Tuck attributes partly to league tables of student satisfaction statistics within the UK, as discussed in 2.3 and 2.4.2. Their studies aim to redress this balance. Bailey and Garner (2010) consider tutors' reflections around feedback on written assignments within the context of institutional policies and departmental practices which reveal tutors' uncertainties about the purposes of feedback activities. Tuck's (2013; 2012) ethnographic study considering the context of tutors' feedback production, partly through in-depth interviews with 14 academics teaching different subjects at UK universities, aims to discover tutors' own observations and perspectives without imposing any pre-envisaged criteria.

There are other studies which include some engagement with tutors' perspectives. Cane (2009) (researching via surveys and interviews within the OU) discusses the range of a tutor's role in mediating the emotional responses prompted by feedback, claiming that a tutor's professional knowledge regarding pedagogic process (as opposed to subject content) is undervalued. Carless *et al* (2011) conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews amongst ten award-winning tutors, labelled as informants, from

each of ten faculties, to inform their recommendations for reconceptualization of the feedback process.

Further, there are empirical studies and pedagogical discussions which jointly address both tutor and student perspectives. Maggs's (2014) case study of 41 teaching staff and 201 students considers staff-student satisfaction with assessment and includes both student and tutor views via questionnaires. Hughes *et al* (2015:1092) claim that their feedback profiling tool helps staff to reflect on feedback provided, based on their analysis of samples of draft and final student essays. Crimmins *et al* (2016) survey both tutors and students to ascertain views on their feedback experiment, foregrounding developing staff-student relationships. O'Donovan *et al* (2016:946) advocate enhancement of "assessment literacy" in both students and staff, by which they mean acting on an evidence-based approach. Li and De Luca's (2014) review of undergraduate feedback on disciplinary writing (see 2.4.2) seems to be equally concerned with both "student perspectives" (page 380) and "teachers' beliefs" (page 384), acknowledging the need for more research on the wider perspectives of all participants, using multiple methods of data collection (page 391). Dawson *et al* (2019:25) use data from 323 staff and 400 students to investigate what "educators" and students consider to be the purpose and effectiveness of feedback.

Finally, there is evidence in some research of an awareness of the impact on tutors' roles when presenting investigations from student perspectives. Although Weaver (2006), in her exploration of students' perceptions of written feedback (see 2.4.2, above), commends Young's (2000) conclusion that tutors should have understanding of an individual student's needs before providing feedback, she considers this an unrealistic expectation of tutors, partly in view of rising student numbers. Price *et al*'s

(2010:286) Oxford study of student experiences (see 2.2, above) considers challenges for tutors, in terms of evaluation of their own feedback effectiveness in relation to its impact. Taylor and da Silva (2014) are concerned to elicit teaching staff's opinions of their findings from their large-scale survey of students' views around feedback effectiveness.

However, most tutor perspectives that are acknowledged around feedback practices tend to be restricted to time constraints and workload pressures; the amount of tutor time and effort spent in producing feedback is acknowledged within many investigations (O'Donovan, *et al*, 2016; Shields, 2015; Scott, 2014; Taylor and da Silva, 2014; Tuck, 2013; 2012; Adams and McNab, 2012; Wingate, 2012; 2010; Carless *et al*, 2011; Chetwynd and Dobbyn, 2011; Bloxham and Campbell, 2010; Price *et al*, 2010; Duncan, 2007). Wingate's (2010:523) data indicate that the formative assessment component of feedback, most highly valued by students, "was the most work-intensive component for the tutors" and Wingate (2012) concludes that shortage of time due to pressures of subject course work is a main reason subject tutors do not endorse academic writing tuition. Taylor and da Silva (2014) refer to the pressure tutors are under to provide feedback within the context of a high teaching load. Maggs (2014) acknowledges the need for more staff time to be allocated to marking. Nicol *et al* (2014:102) comment that it seems peer feedback reduces the need for "external feedback"; they refer to tutor time spent on feedback production as a limitation (page 103). Wakefield *et al* (2014:254), in explaining the rationale for their feedback checklist experiment, acknowledge the tutor time invested in the feedback process and claim that staff would benefit from being "more precise". Shields (2015:622) highlights the



literature's references to the amount of tutor time needed to provide formative feedback.

The paucity of research with a more in-depth focus on tutors' perspectives, discussed above, does not, however, prevent recommendations that include prescriptively worded advice involving tutors, such as Pereira *et al*'s (2016:13): "teachers should use learner-centred methods and should avoid traditional exams". "Teacher-centred" appears to be a theme of criticisms surrounding the feedback process (see 2.5). Wakefield *et al* (2014) declare that a challenge facing staff "is the need to appreciate and understand the diverse abilities of students they teach" (page 254). Training of tutors is recommended by Wakefield *et al* (2014) and Wingate (2019), although both acknowledge that more data is required from interviews with tutors.

Much research into and pedagogical discussions around feedback, therefore, appear to be from students' viewpoints with a nod towards tutors' roles, particularly in acknowledging time spent producing feedback, sometimes being accompanied by prescriptions for tutors' 'improved' working practices. A key aspect which is missing from this relatively small research base is an exploration of the extent of tutor agency in feedback and assessment practices, for example, in respect of institutional expectations of what is valued. Given that I consider the institutional dimension to feedback practices central to building an understanding of feedback around assessed writing in HE, I now turn to consider research foregrounding institutional perspectives.

#### 2.4.4 Institutional perspectives

It seems clear from Tuck's (2012:5) study that institutional requirements and objectives tend to both prescribe and constrain tutors' feedback practices. Exactly how such institutional imperatives drive feedback practices is largely under-researched but seems an important dimension to consider.

Whilst studies exploring feedback tend not to foreground an institutional perspective, it appears that institutional interests underpin much research. Murray and Lawrence (2000:205), for example, in their consideration of practitioner-based research principles, recognise the many stakeholders in policy and that policy is often led by concern to preserve or enhance an institution's overall research funding. Some feedback research, then, tends to be sponsored and valued by those that have vested interests in student achievement and retention at an institutional level. Additionally, as discussed (2.3), more recently student ratings within National Student Surveys, data which feeds into the Teaching Excellent Framework for gauging the quality of teaching, are an increasing focus for UK universities.

Such published ratings appear to motivate Adams and McNab's (2012) research, which focuses on students' perceptions with prescriptive recommendations for tutors. They explain (2012:37) that a student fee increase (2012) is "beginning to force more scrutiny of the student experience" within individual institutions and more widely. Moreover, such an institutional perspective seems to be underlined, almost appearing as an audit, when they clarify that their interest is in the "reported" (page 38) learning experience of students and consider that their data might form part of evidence presented to an internal/external review.

Therefore, it seems that student concerns and criticism, such as those publicly highlighted within national surveys, are perceived to reflect an institution's reputation. Whilst Scott (2014) is upfront about motivations for a focus on student perspectives, she justifies this approach as seeming

“a logical first step towards universities doing better in addressing general student dissatisfaction with the feedback they receive” (page 49).

O'Donovan *et al* (2016:946) conclude their exploration of feedback literature and strategies by highlighting the underpinning responsibility of and benefit to institutions, although their paper focuses on individual action. They, again, allude to student satisfaction ratings as a motivating factor:

“it is those institutions brave enough to adopt evidence-based and theoretically sound approaches to assessment feedback, likely to involve fundamental changes to rules, processes and resource allocations, which will potentially gain the most in an era where student satisfaction has become increasingly important.”

Overall, then, it seems that research is often framed within institutional goals and values; this is sometimes suggested by language choice, as in Carless *et al*'s (2011:395) focus on “award-winning teachers”, representing an institutional value judgement. Chetwynd and Dobbryn (2011:67) consider the role of feedback in student ‘retention’ a key institutional concern within their survey of 70 tutors' attitudes and strategies for feedback provision on a first level module of a distance learning institution. They recommend enhanced support for tutors in the form of more specific Marking Guides, documentation that might be considered to embed the institution's perspective. Hughes

*et al* (2015:1091), in their development of a feedback analysis tool, seem to adopt an institutional framework when recommending applications to

“enable institution-wide changes in feedback practice to be monitored in response to other changes in practice”.

Wingate’s (2010) study (see 2.4.2), which focuses on students’ uptake of formative assessment on their academic writing, is evidence of an underpinning concern for institutional values with some focus on student and tutor perspectives. For example, Wingate (2010:523) sets out to ascertain whether formative assessment has made a “positive improvement” on student writing in order to “justify the investment of time and resources”.

Recommendations arising from empirical studies and pedagogical discussions tend to be designed for the smooth running of the academic system overall, for example, Crimmins *et al*’s (2016:150) model of student-tutor dialogue advocates a future longitudinal study to establish whether feedback could be transformed to “enable students to move on to their next phase of learning or assessment practice”. Hughes *et al* (2015) are also concerned that feedback relates to future modules within an institution.

Therefore, much research appears to be grounded in institutional values and interests, although institutional perspectives tend not to be foregrounded explicitly in studies of feedback. However, a small amount of work has been carried out, as noted above, such as by Chetwynd and Dobbyn (2011), which considers specifically the institutional dimension to feedback, and is important to my interest in building an understanding of feedback practices which takes account of what I see as three key perspectives. My

main method to explore institutional perspectives involved interviewing central academics (see 1.2.2) but I also analysed brief extracts from key official documentation (such as in *Appendix 10*).

#### 2.4.5 Exploring feedback from three perspectives

Whilst there is limited research which seeks to explore all three perspectives, that is, those of students, tutors and the institution, there are exceptions. Duncan (2007:273), considering the feedback history of 16 student volunteers, notes that some tutors' feedback was aimed at multiple audiences, including internal and external markers and "institutional reviewers". Tuck (2013; see 2.3 and 2.4), in advocating the importance of focusing on tutors' neglected perspectives, besides students', includes consideration of "institutionally-positioned" viewpoints (page 40). Moreover, a number of studies which focus on students' perspectives do also consider tutors' views, some with apparent parity of consideration, such as Li and De Luca (2014), as discussed in 2.4 above. Dawson *et al* (2019:26) identify a new post-2010 era within empirical studies, whereby feedback is understood as a more holistic process, "involving a multitude of players". However, they note that there remain "a lack of studies that include both staff and students from a range of disciplinary contexts".

The above sections relate to my research questions in presenting an overview of empirical research and pedagogical discussions which foreground the three key perspectives I identified in 1.2.2, student, tutor and institutional, the latter being operationalised in this research as 'central academic' participants plus official documentation extracts. The next section considers these investigations further, which,

whether focused on single or multiple perspectives, tend to be framed within a 'problem/solution' approach, as suggested in 2.3, above.

## **2.5 Feedback research: 'problem/solution' approach**

A range of apparent failings are perceived by empirical researchers and within pedagogical discussions to be the root of problems with feedback practices, thereby motivating investigations. Further problematic issues are highlighted during these investigations. Solutions are then proposed "in answer to the shortcomings of current feedback practice" (Crimmins *et al*, 2016:150). This section considers five identified 'problems', together with their proposed 'solutions'. The first three of these 'problems' are examples of perceived failings that are part of the declared reasons for the studies taking place. They are, firstly, teacher-centredness, linked to a 'top down' approach, secondly, paucity of tutor-student dialogue and, thirdly, lack of clarity of institutionally-valued expectations. The fourth and fifth 'problems' discussed below are highlighted within investigations into how feedback can be more effective; they are the relevance of feedback to future academic study and feedback timeliness. I then consider how the 'success' of the proposed 'solutions' to some of these problems tends to be measured and suggest that this is usually by summative grades.

Teacher-centred approaches, assuming 'top-down' hierarchical feedback provision are, as discussed (2.4.3), much criticised (Pereira *et al*, 2016; Scott, 2014), and such criticism tends to be linked to a call for greater student agency, in terms of active involvement and autonomy in feedback practices (Pereira *et al*, 2016; Nicol *et al*, 2014; Scott, 2014; Wakefield *et al*, 2014; Adcroft and Willis, 2013; Carless *et al*, 2011; Bloxham and

Campbell, 2010; Cane, 2009; Granville and Dison, 2009). I interpret 'agency' as a person exercising a conscious choice within active engagement and not deferring to an authoritative voice. (The concept of agency is explored further in 3.3.3.)

A solution of introducing more learner-centred approaches is advocated following several studies which appear to envisage varying degrees of student agency. Cane (2009) concludes that a student needs to be involved in feedback for it to be effective and others (Bloxham and Campbell, 2010; Granville and Dison, 2009) advocate a shared tutor-student process also. Carless *et al* (2011:406) recommend development of practices "in which student autonomy and self-monitoring capacities become paramount". Enhanced student independence in learning is the theme of Adcroft and Willis's (2013) four-year experiment amongst approximately 1800 UK final-year students to test their system of 'enquiry-based feedback' (page 803), assessing the strengths/weaknesses of their own written work. Nicol *et al* (2014:103) advocate peer review as an "alternative to teacher feedback", defined as

"an arrangement whereby students evaluate and make judgements about the work of their peers and construct a written feedback commentary".

They comment:

"Most researchers are now in agreement that if students are to learn from feedback, they must have opportunities to construct their own meaning from the received message: they must do something with it, analyse it, ask questions about it, discuss it with others and connect it with prior knowledge."

Wakefield *et al* (2014:260) claim that their Essay Feedback Checklist experiment promotes active learning, helping students to become “more autonomous”. Agency as a concept of active involvement of students and tutors in the feedback process is the subject of Sanchez and Dunworth’s (2015) exploration of postgraduate students’ and their tutors’ experiences at a UK university.

However, proposed ‘solutions’ to the identified ‘problem’ of teacher-centredness of self-regulation and enhanced student agency appear constrained in some studies. Carless *et al* (2011:406) research amongst tutors only and suggest a particularly institutionally-controlled concept of self-monitoring:

“students may need to be pushed to involve themselves in developing self-regularity practices”.

Adcroft and Willis’s (2013:803) experiment is, again, framed within institutional control; whilst students work out “strengths and weaknesses for themselves”, the process requires a discussion forum in two parts, students being provided with different models of what is valued and a detailed marking scheme, in which the students are “required” to participate. Nicol *et al*’s (2014) construction of a peer review strategy has been discussed (2.4.2), as has Wakefield *et al*’s (2014) measurement of the effectiveness of their feedback checklist via assignment grades. Pereira *et al*’s (2016:10) definition of “learner-centred” seems to be by example, such as “portfolios, project work in teams” (as opposed to examinations which are considered “traditional” methodology) but there appears little explanation of how the recommended assessment strategies are learner-centred, save that the literature indicates these methods are “systematic and continuous”, enabling teacher/student “negotiation, collaboration and interaction”.



Such concerns about teacher/tutor-centredness tend to be linked to a recommendation for more student-tutor dialogue, and the second key problem and concern with feedback practices is the apparent paucity of such dialogue (Dawson *et al*, 2019; Crimmins *et al*, 2016; Nicol *et al*, 2014; Tuck, 2013: 2012; Carless *et al*, 2011; Bloxham and Campbell, 2010; Price *et al*, 2010; Nicol, 2010; Granville and Dison, 2009). Nicol (2010:501) comments,

“many diverse expressions of dissatisfaction with written feedback both from students and teachers are all symptoms of impoverished dialogue.”

There seems little doubt throughout the literature that dialogue is viewed as crucial to the feedback process; it appears that feedback is perceived as either an integral part of such dialogue, of “paramount importance as it fosters the communication between the teachers and the students” (Pereira *et al* 2016:8) or as needing reform to incorporate it to “acknowledge the active role that students must play in such processes” (Nicol *et al*, 2014:103).

Dialogue is often used in the literature on feedback to signal two-way spoken communication between students and tutors but exactly what is meant by dialogue varies. Digital communication, such as email, texts and social media, tends not to be discussed as dialogue in the literature reviewed, although it is within my study (see Chapters 4-7). Written feedback is sometimes considered as dialogue, such as by Bloxham and Campbell (2010:291), who relate their attempt to create ‘meaningful dialogue’ through an experiment with feedback response sheets. Nicol (2010), too, sees dialogue in terms of written comments, supplemented by spoken conversation and Crimmins *et al* (2016:42) in their report of their study, ‘A written, reflective and dialogic strategy for assessment feedback that can enhance student/ teacher relationships’,

consider that written feedback can be dialogic if “facilitating student/teacher relationships”. However, conversely, Carless *et al* (2011:396) do not acknowledge written comments as part of a dialogue:

“The focus on dialogue is central to our thinking because of the limitations of one-way written comments.”

Rather, they describe written feedback comments on assignments as a “one-way transmissive view of feedback” (page 396).

The third main ‘problem’ around feedback practices identified above relates to the lack of clarity of institutionally-valued expectations. Taylor and da Silva (2014:804) comment:

“from a pedagogical perspective, student interpretation of feedback may not necessarily contain the same message as the marker is trying to imply.”

Opaque language choice regarding advice about academic conventions is cited, for example, by Lillis and Turner (2001:58 and see 3.2), such as “Write an introduction”. Duncan (2007:273) notes that:

“statements like ‘use a more academic style’ were clear enough for the staff to interpret, but not for the students”.

Adams and McNab (2012:40) are concerned that the criteria for assessment “should be demystified and clearly communicated” to avoid confusing students.

Such clarity of institutionally-valued expectations is also related to a desire to bridge the gap between the amount of feedback provided by tutors and that perceived as used by student writers, a theme of concern in the literature reviewed (Dawson, *et al*, 2019;

O'Donovan *et al*, 2016; Pereira *et al*, 2016; Li and De Luca, 2014; Cartney, 2010; Nicol, 2010; Wingate, 2010; Weaver, 2006; Lillis, 2003). Adcroft and Willis (2013:813) claim that central to enhancing engagement with their system of Enquiry Based Feedback

“is closing the gap between understandings and interpretations of feedback and its impact on performance between academics and students”,

so promoting mutual understanding of its “role, purpose and form” (page 804), which they believe an important component of effective feedback.

The final two identified ‘problems’ with feedback, the lack of feedback that feeds forward to future assessed writing and its timeliness, are ones highlighted within research findings, as opposed to being at the root of declared reasons for investigations, as with the three ‘problems’ discussed above.

Dawson *et al* (2019:25-6) suggest that the process of feeding forward to future learning should be the focus of national survey questions, which are currently “based on an outmoded understanding of feedback”, concentrating on students’ satisfaction with its quality and quantity. It seems that the concept of feeding forward can be viewed within four contexts. Firstly, it may be relevant to a life outside and beyond the module, to which little reference is made in studies. Secondly, feeding forward might apply to future assessments generally, such as Wakefield *et al*’s (2014) feedback checklist, intended to relate to “future and alternative work” (page 253). Thirdly, concern is expressed, for example by Hughes *et al* (2015:1079), that feedback within a module should feed forward to the “holistic” aims of the whole programme, which motivates the development of their feedback tool. Finally, and most often, feeding forward is concerned with the next assessment within a module; Duncan (2007 and see 2.4.5 and

above) found that feedback that fails to look forward to future assessment is highlighted as a reason why students did not collect assessed work. Adams and McNab (2012:40) suggest that feedback should be “in time for it to be applied on subsequent related or similar learning and assessment tasks”.

Timeliness of feedback is a frequent ‘problem’ highlighted in the literature, as pointed out by Pereira *et al* (2016:7) and Jackson and Marks (2016:532). A specific timescale for feedback return is rarely specified, although Maggs (2014:11) recommends twenty days and O’Donovan *et al* (2016:238) acknowledge that students might possess differing ideas about what comprises prompt feedback. Shields (2015:622) concludes that timeliness of the first piece of feedback is significant in relation to students’ confidence, reducing the stress of waiting time, although not in itself sufficient to stop anxiety about possible failure.

These, then, are the five main identified ‘problems’ with some suggested ‘solutions’ surrounding feedback practices around assessed writing foregrounded by empirical researchers and within pedagogical discussions. Evaluation of proposed solutions tends to be in terms of their impact on summative grading.

Taylor and da Silva (2014) judge effective feedback by its success at narrowing the gap between feedback given and used, measured by grades. Wakefield *et al* (2014) assess the success of their Essay Feedback Checklist through attainment on related scores between two examinations. Wingate (2010:524) measures feedback effectiveness via “overall grade development” and declares her assumption that student progress is because students have paid “careful attention to feedback”. Crisp’s (2007:571) exploration gauges the extent to which feedback

alone affected “higher standards” according to the relative increase in assignment marks.

Within this use of grading as the measurement of success of perceived solutions to problems with feedback, there seems an embedded assumption of a causal relationship between feedback and ‘success’, in isolation from other potential life experiences, concurrent or past.

Further, there appears an assumption that students always share such a fundamental focus on grades as their reason for study and measurement of their achievement. Scott (2014:53) notes that students complained: “staff are primarily interested in providing a numerical mark” and Scott explains (page 52) that because grades were salient on returned essays, then, unsurprisingly,

“it is the mark given...that will be the most effective indicator of how the student is tracking in relation to the final result”.

Scott argues that students’ underlying interest in the grade was a means of gauging progress, whereas feedback comments could have functioned similarly. As Price *et al* (2010:278) ask:

“If staff define the purpose and students make the judgement but hold a different view of purpose, how useful is the measure?”

Moreover, there is some acknowledgement and concern about the potential negative effects of summative grading, indicating the tension between feedback as grade and as advice for future academic writing, as discussed in 2.2. Shields (2015:622) advocates more “low-stakes” assessment, to help combat students’

emotional stress and reduced confidence, when discovering a strong emotional response to feedback amongst first-year students. O'Donovan *et al* (2016:239) draw out the suggestion from their literature review that grade allocation might prevent engagement with feedback comments. Adams and McNab (2012:40) recommend an imposed strategy of low-stakes summative or formative assessment before any significant summative assessment to establish students' understanding of required standards.

## **2.6 This study's contribution**

This review of empirical studies and pedagogical discussions around feedback practices on assessed writing indicates the following:

- studies tend to foreground one perspective, predominantly students';
- many studies take a 'problem/solution' approach, which omits exploration of wider influences on participants in the feedback process beyond the assessment context;
- many studies evaluate the success of proposed solutions in improving feedback in terms of the final grade, rather than considering participants' perspectives.

As indicated in 2.4, given that feedback necessarily involves at least three key perspectives, of students, tutors and the institution, there is a need to develop studies which consider this range of perspectives. The study on which this thesis is based sets out to contribute to the literature by exploring feedback practices on assessed writing

from student, tutor and institutional perspectives, the latter based on research amongst central academics plus an analysis of brief extracts from official documentation.

This thesis aims to:

- explore three key perspectives in the feedback process;
- explore perspectives without making value judgements/assumptions;
- consider wider influences beyond the feedback context, such as experiences of education and employment, reasons for study and underpinning concepts of academic writing.

The analysis in chapters 5-7 is informed by a particular theoretical framework, a Bakhtinian heuristic. The next chapter considers approaches to language and communication around feedback on assessed and academic writing (3.2), and then sets out the rationale for selecting a Bakhtinian-informed heuristic to inform analysis and discussion in this thesis (3.3).

## **2.7 Summary**

I began this chapter by reviewing a range of definitions and interpretations of ‘feedback’ (2.2) and then considering empirical and pedagogical aims of and approaches towards investigations around feedback practices (2.3). This review indicated that empirical researchers and pedagogical discussions tend to foreground students’ perspectives (2.4), take a ‘problem/solution’ approach in terms of identifying concerns and that in proposing solutions make certain assumptions about students’ reasons for study and

the role of summative grading (2.5). Finally, I outlined the aims of this thesis and its contribution to pedagogical debates and referred to an exploratory framework, a Bakhtinian-informed heuristic (2.6), which is presented in the following chapter.



## CHAPTER 3

### DEVELOPING AN EXPLORATORY FRAMEWORK

#### 3.1 Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to explain the rationale for choosing a theoretical framework that enables me to explore and interpret perspectives around feedback practices on assessed writing. I consider issues surrounding language and communication around feedback on assessed/academic writing (3.2), focussing on the concept of dialogue and leading to the adoption of a Bakhtinian-informed heuristic to explore data in relation to my research questions (3.3). I identify three pertinent Bakhtinian concepts in respect of language and communication: the concept of language and communication as dialogic (3.3.2); the concept of authoritative voice and internally persuasive discourse (3.3.3); the concept of heteroglossia (3.3.4). I pose questions relating to these notions which arise from the review of empirical studies and pedagogical discussions (Chapter 2). These questions are used to structure my analysis and discussion in Chapters 5-7 in response to my research questions and are summarised in Table 3.1 at the end of this chapter.

## 3.2 Language and communication and feedback practices

This section considers two issues relating to language and communication around feedback practices, firstly, discussions about the perceived need for clarity and, secondly, what is meant by ‘dialogue’. The need for clarity of what are considered institutionally-valued expectations of academic writing underpin ideas regarding the gap between feedback provided and used (and see 2.5), such as discussed by Taylor and da Silva (2014), and the recognition of the need to clarify what is valued in assessment (Adcroft and Willis, 2013). There is concern reported (Lillis and Turner, 2001; Pardoe, 2000; Ivanič and Moss, 1991) that academic writing which fails to match a valued and required standard is deemed deficient and yet the criteria for meeting this standard is not made consistently clear to student writers. Such a ‘deficit’ approach has implications for feedback practices which place emphasis on summative grading (as discussed in 2.5), based on institutionally set criteria, so imposing a valued standard. It then follows that students’ academic writing measured against such criteria takes on a greater salience in the grading process.

Particular concern is expressed in relation to those new to an academic context, whether as novice writers or from the widening of access to university entrance. For example, Lillis and Turner (2001:56) point to an implied deficit model leading to complaints about non-traditional students not adhering to valued, yet opaquely worded academic conventions, such as “avoid plagiarism” (page 58 and see 2.5). Ivanič *et al* (2006 and in Edwards *et al*, 2009) consider that a ‘deficit’ outlook devalues other literacy practices in which those considered as ‘novice’ (such as some in my research context might be perceived) academic writers engage and manage in their everyday lives. For instance, Lillis and Turner (2001:65) highlight the experiences of “new

entrants to higher education” via widening participation who are disadvantaged through an “implied deficit model” (page 57) being “confronted with a monoglossic assumption of what language use is when they “bring their uses and understandings of language with them”. Lillis and Turner (2001:57-59) and Lillis and Scott (2007:8) suggest that the rhetoric promoting diversity in entrance to HE does not necessarily extend to diversity in communication practices, which tends to be equated with “falling standards”, with student writers’ language becoming a “problem to be solved” when texts do not match institutionally-valued expectations.

The second focus of this chapter is what is meant by ‘dialogue’. Dialogue is perceived to enhance clarity of institutional expectations in assessment of student writing (Carless *et al*, 2011; Nicol, 2010). Moreover, as discussed (2.5), empirical researchers tend to link concerns about a hierarchical, top-down, teacher/tutor-centred approach to a recommendation for enhanced student-tutor dialogue, the paucity of which is perceived as a problem (Dawson *et al*, 2019; Crimmins *et al*, 2016; Nicol *et al*, 2014; Tuck 2013; 2012). Yet, what is meant by ‘dialogue’ in relation to feedback practices is often left unarticulated. In seeking to understand and theorise the notion of dialogue, the work of Bakhtin proved particularly useful and led to the heuristic I outline later in this chapter.

A concept of dialogue permeates Bakhtin’s work, a principle which “animated and controlled” his writings throughout his life (Holquist, 1990:15). Yet, Bakhtin’s concept of ‘dialogue’ and what it means to see dialogue as ‘dialogic’ have been variously interpreted by researchers. Haynes (2013:142) comments: “Dialogue and the dialogic are perhaps the most misunderstood of Bakhtin’s concepts.” Similarly, Lillis (2003:199) argues that “Bakhtin and the dialogic are being used to mean many things or...to mean very little.” Lillis (2003:197f) explains her understanding of Bakhtin’s work around

language and communication as being on two levels, the descriptive and the ideal. The former sees language as inherently 'dialogic' and as always involving 'addressivity', in terms of language's relationship with its context, including who and what is being addressed, which is what Lillis explains is what Bakhtin means by a chain of communication (page 198). All utterances inevitably and constantly stem from other utterances as:

"In all areas of life and ideological activity, our speech is filled to overflowing with other people's words, which are transmitted with highly varied degrees of accuracy and impartiality." (Bakhtin, [1934/35], 1981:197).

At this descriptive level, then, 'dialogic' refers to language and communication as involving a constant interrelatedness and engagement with the words of others. This level can be seen to relate to Morris's (1994:13) interpretation that discourse is inherently dialogic and that utterances continually respond to other utterances and also to Holquist's (1981:426) explanation of dialogism<sup>3</sup>, as appearing to suggest that because all language relates to a "greater whole", there is always a potential to use discourse dialogically.

The second level identified by Lillis (2003:198) is of an idealisation of dialogue as involved in a continual struggle between centralising (centripetal) forces, which speak with one, uncontested voice, and a diversifying (centrifugal) force with "many truths". For Bakhtin, then, the ideal is that dialogue would struggle against "the forces of monologism" (Lillis, 2003:199). Lillis explains that these opposing forces "map closely

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<sup>3</sup> Dialogism is an umbrella term that Holquist (1990:15) uses for Bakhtin's work on dialogue.

on to” (page 198) Bakhtin’s notions of the tensions between authoritative voice and internally persuasive discourse. (See Section 3.3.3 for further discussion). Bakhtin (1934/35,1981:347) describes “the authoritative word” as one that “does not know internal persuasiveness”.

The internally persuasive voice is associated with reappropriation and ownership of discourse (page 345) and according to Bakhtin ([1934/35],1981:346) is characterized by “unfinishedness and the inexhaustibility of our further dialogic interaction with it”. An utterance is only dialogic if it is directed to a response and not an end in itself, not a goal or resolution. At this level, an utterance, then, is defined as dialogic/monologic only through the way it is enacted, that is, according to its specific context of use.

The two levels, identified by Lillis (2003), relate to the first two of the “distinct ways” that Haynes (2013:142) interprets Bakhtin’s use of the concepts of ‘dialogue’ and ‘dialogic’: firstly, that all utterances are potentially dialogic and, secondly, that they can be monologic or dialogic within a unique situation. The third interpretation recognised by Haynes is of “life itself” as dialogic, in which we participate: “Only through dialogue do we know ourselves, other persons and the world”. Holquist (1990:28) explains this concept in that according to Bakhtin:

“Existence, like language, is a shared event...in order to see ourselves, we must appropriate the vision of others.”

These ways of interpreting Bakhtin’s concept of dialogic cause Haynes (2013:125) to focus on the key to an understanding of Bakhtin’s work as of its leading to our “awareness and appreciation of our profound interdependence with others”.

The concepts that all language relates to previous utterances and that there is a continual and deep interdependence with others are both of fundamental significance in seeking to explore the perspectives of key participants in the feedback process.

However, it is Lillis's (2003) identified second level of dialogic as an ideal, to be worked at, that is the most pertinent to an operationalization of the Bakhtinian concept of dialogue in explorations of feedback practices. Dialogue as an ideal presents in pedagogical contexts as "questioning, exploring, connecting in order to develop a newer way to mean" (Lillis, 2003:199).

Whilst enhanced student-tutor dialogue is seen as "of paramount importance" (Pereira *et al*, 2016:8 and see 2.5) to the feedback process in order to foster communication, within the empirical research and pedagogical discussions reviewed, as is already stated, what is meant by dialogue/ic is often unclear. Some studies equate dialogue with 'dialogic' but there is no consistent interpretation of either in Bakhtinian terms.

Moreover, it seems that a further concept is implicitly being used in some discussions of dialogue, which is 'dialectic' and which Bakhtin sees as a dimension to monologism.

Dialectic is used to refer to meaning making premised on the end goal being that of synthesis. Bakhtin sees dialectic approaches to meaning making as fundamentally monologic, given that synthesis privileges one statement over another, one end point.

This kind of synthesis is typical of much academic writing where the goal is often that of presenting one line of argument or an overarching thesis (see discussions in Wegerif, 2008; Lillis, 2003) rather than, in Bakhtinian terms, keeping meaning always 'in play' (Bakhtin, 1984 and see Lillis, 2011). This dialectic approach seems to underpin many neo-Vygotskian orientations towards pedagogy where the teacher is viewed as leading the student to a particular end point (see, for example, White, 2014) and is evident in

institutional and pedagogical positionings towards feedback relating to such writing, whereby the emphasis is on there being one, institutionally-valued, end goal in students' writing. This focus on an institutionally-valued goal can, in Bakhtinian terms, be reflected in authoritative voices dominating practices around feedback (discussed further in 3.3.2).

The concept of a dialectic approach, with an institutionally-valued end goal, as a dimension of an authoritative, monologic voice in Bakhtinian terms seems to be reflected in some of the studies discussed below. The nature of dialogism envisaged by five studies that specifically advocate "dialogic" feedback on assessed writing vary in relation to Bakhtin's concept of continually and actively responding to other utterances without resolution. These are studies by: Steen-Utheim and Wittek (2017); Nicol (2010); Carless *et al* (2011); Crimmins *et al* (2016); Wingate (2019). Of these studies, only Steen-Utheim and Wittek's research draws on Bakhtin explicitly.

Steen-Utheim and Wittek's (2017) endeavour to explore how dialogic feedback takes place in their longitudinal and ethnographic study amongst first-year undergraduates (see 2.4.2) seems closest to what I understand of a Bakhtinian concept of dialogism, that is valuing differences and, as White (2014:223) describes: "refusal to close off, finalise, or pre-determine outcomes". Steen-Utheim and Wittek (2017) analyse audio-recordings of feedback dialogues, field notes, assessment templates and classroom observations and recordings. Their pedagogical observations illuminate how a compromise might be achieved between a dialogic ideal and what they acknowledge (page 28) as a teacher-centred context, although their own reference to tutors as a "more competent other" (page 26) seems much in keeping with a dialogic approach. Steen-Utheim and Wittek (2017:26) argue:

“A main target of dialogic feedback is its opportunities for participants to contribute to the dialogue by bringing in new meanings and perspectives.”

They suggest (page 27) “four potentialities for learning”, comprising: “emotional and relational support”, one of empathy and trust; “maintenance of the dialogue”, asking questions and using minimal responses to prolong and develop the dynamic nature of dialogue; “students’ opportunities to express themselves”, commenting, “Letting one’s voice be heard in the presence of the other is an important dialogic move”; “the other’s contribution to individual growth”, with opportunities created for displaying students’ own experiences and thoughts. This latter potentiality resonates with my own concern to consider the influential voices on participants from a wide context (rather than focusing only on their concurrent HE experiences).

The other studies, whilst using the term dialogic, do not refer explicitly to Bakhtin and seem less attuned to a Bakhtinian notion of dialogic. Nicol (2010:603) proposes that “feedback should be conceptualised as a dialogical and two-way process” and that “impoverished and fractured” dialogue causes much dissatisfaction surrounding feedback and its “dialogical context needs to be restated to render it more effective”. Nicol (2010:512) lists components of what he considers “dialogical” feedback as “understandable”, “selective”, “specific”, “timely”, “contextualised”, “non-judgemental”, “balanced”, “forward looking”, “transferable” (meaning addressing process and skills, besides content) and “personal” (to particular students, according to what is known about them). Such interpretation of dialogic communication is advocated as taking place via student-student and student-tutor discussions; the assumed goal of the interaction seems to be to inform students about institutionally-valued expectations with written feedback used to “reinforce task requirements” (page 506). This approach



seems to be more monologic than dialogic in Bakhtinian terms, with the focus being the ensuring of a particular end-product.

Similarly, Carless *et al's* (2011:397) definition of 'dialogic' feedback appears to be aimed towards institutionally-valued set targets as the end goal:

“an interactive exchange in which interpretations are shared, meanings negotiated and expectations clarified...Dialogic approaches to assessment can guide students on what is good performance by facilitating discussions of quality in relation to specific assignment tasks”.

Crimmins *et al's* (2016:141) concerns, as explained (2.5), are with tutor-student communication and, to foster this, they experimented with “dialogic” consultations following written feedback. However, these consultations were confined to ten minutes for practical reasons, a time constraint criticised by staff surveyed, who otherwise thought the consultations to be generally positive in terms of relationship building. Again, the ‘dialogic’ process advocated appears monologic, in the way that it is limited and managed by the authoritative voice of the institution.

Finally, Wingate (2019:26) in her exploration of interaction in academic tutorials defines dialogic pedagogy as when “teacher and students are jointly engaged in the construction of knowledge”. Wingate discusses dialogic student-teacher relationships as a contrast to the predominantly monologic ones she witnesses that provide “ready answers” and “solutions” (page 35). Rather, Wingate (page 25) describes a dialogic approach as one in which the tutor as expert “prompted the student to develop these solutions”. Wingate (such as on page 26) repeatedly refers to this process as “scaffolding”, which seems to relate more to a Vygotskian dialectic (see above) than a

dialogic process. Whilst this approach is described by Wingate (2019:25) as “egalitarian”, it is, again, goal-directed, aimed towards synthesis and solution, and therefore monologic-dialectic, rather than dialogic in nature.

In summary, whilst dialogue/ic feedback is advocated in the literature, there are a range of interpretations of dialogic, tending towards the monologic-dialectic, that is as leading to one institutionally-valued end goal of students’ assessed writing. Steen-Utheim and Wittek’s (2017) interpretation seems closest to a Bakhtinian notion of dialogic and is the approach I adopt when using dialogue/ic in discussions of feedback.

In this section, I have focused specifically on the notion of dialogue/ic, how it is used in the literature on feedback and the particular definition used by Bakhtin which has informed my thesis.

The next section continues to focus on Bakhtin but is broader in scope, establishing a conceptual framework for exploring perspectives around feedback in subsequent chapters. A Bakhtinian-informed heuristic is introduced which is then applied in the rest of this thesis as an interpretive framework to explore feedback practices around assessed writing.

### **3.3 Building a Bakhtinian-informed heuristic**

#### **3.3.1 Why Bakhtin**

In searching for a theoretical framework that would enable me to explore in greater depth what is meant by feedback and in particular what is meant by dialogue, as stated in Chapter 1, I was drawn to Bakhtin’s theories of language and communication.

Bakhtin is a key theorist on language and the dialogic nature of communication whose works are cited widely across the arts and social sciences. In the next sections (3.3.2-3.3.4), I develop a Bakhtinian heuristic which enables me to take account of the views of multiple participants, without foregrounding one participant perspective over another and to avoid adopting a 'problem/solution' approach, discussed in 2.5 as prevalent in investigations into feedback practices. I focus on three key areas, language and communication as 'dialogic' (3.3.2), authoritative voice and internally persuasive discourse (3.3.3), and heteroglossia (3.3.4).

### 3.3.2 Language and communication as 'dialogic'

What it means to see language as dialogic in Bakhtin's terms and how this notion can be applied pedagogically to student-tutor interaction around feedback on students' assessed writing have been widely interpreted, as discussed above (3.2). My own interpretation, in relation to this study, sees all utterances as potentially dialogic, in that they stem from and respond to another, but that they might be constructed and/or experienced as monologic. Monologic approaches favour (explicitly or implicitly) a privileged truth, whereas a dialogic relationship between participants represents a constant search for meaning, the existence of many truths, and an ongoing tension between an authoritative voice and internally persuasive discourse (discussed below).

In operationalising the concept of dialogic as a heuristic for my study, it is illuminating to consider conflicting theoretical opinions of the potential pedagogical application of the Bakhtinian concept of dialogic interaction. For example, White (2014) criticises Wertsch (2004) for an apparent conflation of Bakhtin's dialogic and monologic

approaches in application to pedagogy. This conflation can be seen in interpretations seemingly evident in the empirical research and pedagogical discussions cited above (3.2) of, for example, Carless *et al* (2011) and Nicol (2010), where a concept of apparently ‘dialogic’ feedback seems more monologic-dialectic in nature, underpinned as it is by one particular end goal, as set out by the institution.

Dialogue, in contrast, implying “mutual enrichment through difference” (White, 2014:219) is at the root of some pedagogical approaches to and discussions of student writing. For example, Halasek (1999:62-3) applies Bakhtinian perspectives on dialogism to composition studies and explains the value of the audience, the addressee, in jointly constructing meaning. Halasek (1999:82) comments on the importance of herself as instructor to “lay bare the play of power inherent in my role as evaluative audience”.

The above consideration of pedagogical applications of Bakhtin’s concept of ‘dialogic’ helps to define a heuristic for interpreting interaction around feedback practices on assessed writing as monologic, dialectic or dialogic (in Bakhtinian terms). For example, the closing of a perceived gap between feedback given and used in the feedback process, related to clarity of expectations (discussed in 2.5 and 3.2) could potentially be viewed as an ongoing, dialogic, tutor-student relationship. However, the extent to which this is two-way, mutually responsive and valuing difference, rather than a communication of ‘fixed’ expectations, leading to an assumed common goal, seems doubtful in the face of set criteria for summative grading. Court (2014:342) considers that the tutor-student “power imbalance” might be indirectly enacted by the pedagogic aim of “de-mystifying academic writing” through clarifying standards: “by giving these students the impression that their words are not good enough.”

In using 'dialogue/dialogic' in this thesis, I am aware of the way it is often used in relation to fixed expectations around feedback but I am interested in a Bakhtinian notion of dialogue, as mutually responsive and as meaning kept in play.

The first key related question arising from this discussion that I apply to my data (Chapters 5-7) in order to better respond to my research questions is:

***To what extent is the interaction that exists around feedback practices dialogic (in Bakhtinian terms)?***

### **3.3.3 Authoritative voice and internally persuasive discourse**

All communication associated with feedback in my research context can be seen as involving some level of dialogue, that is, one person seeking to communicate with another person. This includes all modes of feedback communication: the formal written feedback as response to students' assessed writing and any follow-up discussion, via telephone, email or face-to-face, around this, if the utterance is taken as both spoken and written (as interpreted by Clark, 2006). However, the extent to which such dialogue is 'dialogic', in the Bakhtinian sense, is questionable, a key reason being the context in which dialogue takes place, which is one of assessment. Any equality in this interaction can be viewed as challenged constantly by the concept of an 'authoritative', voice (Bakhtin,[1934/35],1981:342), an idea that what is valued is owned by one authority and is non-negotiable, monologic, neither anticipating answer/reaction, nor taking into account the 'other' or any variation in context and "demands that we acknowledge it". Such a concept of authoritative discourse can be applied to the presumed hierarchical relations around feedback (Figure 1.1), like grading, originating

from the authority of the academic institution of the University and implemented by tutors. Summative grades are traditionally perceived as imbued with “embodied capital” (Thesen, 2006:156) and the type of inherent and unchallenged communicative power viewed by Bakhtin ([1934/35],1981:342) as “organically connected to a past that is felt to be hierarchically higher”. This can be related to what an Academic Literacies approach (1.2.3 and 3.2) challenges as a ‘deficit’ model (Lillis and Scott, 2007; Lea and Street, 2006; 1998, Lea, 2004; Lillis and Turner, 2001), a view of any student writing that fails to meet an expected standard, as discussed above (3.2). A deficit approach sees writing as decontextualized, with fixed outcomes, which Tuck (2013) perceives is the dominant view within HE and which Lillis (2011:402-3) argues embodies institutional expectations that continue to promote a monologic stance towards academic writing for assessment (and publication).

Within the literature reviewed (Chapter 2), certain apparently authoritative voices can be discerned, such as ‘top down’ hierarchical feedback provision and teacher-centredness (2.5) and through accounts of constraints imposed by institutional objectives (2.4.4). Further, as [Figure 1.1](#) suggests, the opinions of students within published ratings from surveys, for example, which rate tutors’ feedback practices, can also be considered as authoritative voices. As discussed above (3.2), the Bakhtinian concept of an authoritative voice is one which suppresses an ‘internally persuasive’ counterpart (Bakhtin [1934/35],1981:270-2;342), which Bakhtin sees as an opposing force, one equated with the welcoming of the voices of others, a “living heteroglossia” ([1934/35],1981:272), rather than one unitary, authoritative voice. In Bakhtin’s terms, ‘internally persuasive discourse’ is associated with ownership of discourse, distinguishing between “one’s own and other’s discourse”, with independence of

thought (page 345 and see 3.2), as opposed to an authoritative voice, which is owned by another. Taking ownership over discourse involves a process of negotiation. Whilst both the authoritative voice and its counterpart, 'internally persuasive discourse' are nominally present in a dialogic relationship, the authoritative voice might have so much historic prestige and its discourse seem so enforced through particular rules and corrections, that, in actuality, any dialogue is weighted on the side of the authoritative voice. This is particularly relevant to my context where there are often high stakes value judgements in the form of grading, as discussed above. In contrast, and where the authoritative voice might most obviously be identified as the tutor, the voice of the student is lacking in status. It seems, then, following Bakhtin's approach to the inherent nature of language and communication, that whilst language is multi-voiced, some voices are imbued with inherent authority, for example, institutional authority in the case of feedback on assessed writing.

I explore (in 5.3.2; 6.3.2 and 7.3.2) how far tutor feedback and comments from central academics (representing the institution) are viewed as authoritative voices by all three participant groups, students, tutors and central academics, within the feedback process and to what extent they are valued and questioned. Bakhtin ([1934/35], 1981:343) explains that the authoritative voice "permits no play with the context" in its demand for "unconditional allegiance". If, then, this voice is interpreted (page 339) or re-conceptualised (page 349), appropriated, for example, a particular comment by a tutor is used, re-interpreted or engaged with by a student, it then becomes part of what Bakhtin (page 341) terms "a double-voice narration", and it can no longer be considered straightforwardly 'authoritative'. Bakhtin (page 344) reiterates that an authoritative voice is only transmitted and is not represented and "is incapable of being double-

voiced". The notion of an authoritative voice, then, can be viewed as relative, rather than absolute; it only remains authoritative while it is perceived as such.

Related to the challenges to an authoritative voice is speaker agency, discussed regarding student involvement and autonomy in the feedback process in 2.5. I interpret agency as a person exercising a conscious choice, in terms of active engagement, not deferring to an authoritative voice, akin to what Bakhtin ([1934-35,1981:294) terms "consciousness" which "must move in and occupy a position", a matter of "expropriating" (page 293) language, which is never neutral, and "forcing it to submit to one's own intentions".

A Bakhtinian notion of agency is identified by Mraović (2008:292) as: "essentially determined by the subjectivity of another who can talk back". Mraović here is allocating agency to a reader/addressee: "The utterance is not determined by the sender of the message, but it is the recipient that gives the final meanings to the words" (pages 288-9). In Bakhtin's ([1934-5],1981:292) words: "Understanding comes to fruition only in the response". Bakhtin, it seems, is implying agency in the action of the response: "all real and integral understanding is actively responsive" (Bakhtin, [1952-3],1994:69). Therefore, the addressee/reader is viewed as an active participant in the construction of meaning and Mraović (2008:289) sees Bakhtin's early concept of *answerability* as offering "the opportunity to challenge, contest and change" a system of authoritative rule, to act (page 292).

Agency is discussed (2.5) as associated with a dialogic relationship in the feedback process by Sanchez and Dunworth (2015), although they do not refer explicitly to Bakhtin: "the most important consideration in the concept of feedback as a dialogic process is agency" (page 458). They continue to comment that students in lacking



agency sought “an authoritative voice for validation” (page 467). Sanchez and Dunworth (2015) found that students encountered agency in various ways, such as through peer networks, in preparing and revising their writing. They (page 468) cite Holliday’s (2005) view that students are autonomous and do exercise agency and that agency is “discovered rather than created”. This view is pertinent to the discussion (2.5) of attempts to impose constructed, learner-centred methods on students. Whilst Sanchez and Dunworth’s case study does explore tutors’ perspectives around feedback practices (such as pressures experienced due to expectations from both students and the institution), their focus on agency, interpreted as active involvement, seems to relate only to students. My study aims to relate to a notion of agency of all participants in the feedback process, students, tutors and central academics (representing the institution).

The concept of agency, then, can be seen as related to Bakhtin’s notion of internally persuasive discourse, which is involved in an inevitable, ongoing struggle with an opposing authoritative voice (3.2). For Bakhtin ([1934/35],1981:272), whilst at a particular time one centring or divergent force might seem dominant, both are inherently significant, creating a “tension-filled unity”. Bakhtin’s metaphor of a battle between these two forces permeates his ‘Discourse in the Novel’ ([1934/35],1981), the notion of wresting a word filled with the intentions of others being described as “forcing it to submit” (page 294). However, the struggle appears to be constructive and creative, an ideal, as discussed (3.2). Such ongoing tensions between dominant and divergent approaches are seen as potentially positive within Academic Literacies (Lillis, 2008).

The second key question, then, that I apply to my data (Chapters 5-7) in response to my research questions and relating to all participants is:

***To what extent are particular voices perceived as authoritative and what evidence is there of the development of internally persuasive discourse?***

### 3.3.4 Heteroglossia

Bakhtin's notion of heteroglossia seems to relate to an inseparable mixture of competing and ideologically-filled 'voices', referred to by Holquist (1981:428) as "stratification, diversity and randomness", having "requirements" for active participation. This inseparability is a key feature of Bakhtin's heteroglossia, influencing voices being mixed within an utterance, the idea that "...at any given moment...language is heteroglot from top to bottom" (Bakhtin, [1934/35],1981:291).

However, in operationalising Bakhtin's idea of heteroglossia, whilst recognising its notion of inseparability, I am interpreting this concept as a range of individual voices or influences which might be seen as being juxtaposed in any use of language, as Bakhtin ([1934/35],1981:292) describes the possibility of juxtaposing world views to "mutually supplement...contradict one another". 'Voices' were interpreted (1.2.1) to refer to traces of discourses from concurrent or past experiences, persons or ideas which seem to be influential in participants' perspectives on feedback. Examples of such voices in this study include students' reasons for their current study (5.3.3), tutors' and one central academic's prior experiences of being students (6.3.3 and 7.3.3) and all participants' underpinning awareness and views of the nature and expectations of writing within an academic context (5.3.3.1, 6.3.3.1, 7.3.3.1 and Tables 5.3, 6.1 and 7.1).

This particular operationalisation of heteroglossia underpins the exploration of perspectives around feedback practices in two key ways. Firstly, it is pertinent to the

concept of multiple voices within the feedback process and with specific reference to my fourth research question: *To what extent are there multiple perspectives around feedback practices on assessed writing?* Secondly, heteroglossia relates to the range of voices beyond the immediate feedback context that influence each participant in the feedback process, explored in 5.3.3, 6.3.3 and 7.3.3, connected to a concern with participants' lived experiences, socially situated and embedded within the context of their everyday lives, that is, within "a specific social and historical situation" (Holquist, 1990:28). Participants' lived experiences are a focus of Academic Literacies informed approaches (Lillis and Scott, 2007 and see 1.2.4), as exemplified in Tuck's (2013) ethnographic study of the contexts within which teachers in HE engage with student writing. 'Voices' in such a context can be perceived as meshed together, as in Bakhtin's sense of inseparability, and described by Ivanič (1998:85) as a "rich stew". Part of this "stew" of voices involved in the feedback process, then, is the wealth of literacies in participants' lives, discussed by Ivanič *et al* (2006:703), and the recognition that a writer's production of an academic text is not "hermetically sealed off" (Lillis and Scott, 2007:19) from other writing practices.

It seems from a review of the literature (Chapter 2) that the wider contexts of students' lives, what they bring to the feedback process, including their reasons for study, appear under-researched or are explored only to a limited extent, with some exceptions. Scott (2014:54) comments:

"students like staff are constantly juggling a range of commitments and it is just possible that our own course may not be top of that list."

Further, as discussed (2.4.3), studies relating to tutors' wider contexts appear to confine their concerns to work and time pressures, with the notable exception of Tuck (2013;

2012). One aim in this thesis is to explore voices related to the wider context of the participants' lives.

The third key related question I apply to my data (Chapters 5-7) in response to my research questions is:

***Are there a range of voices that influence participants' perspectives around feedback practices?***

### 3.3.5 A Bakhtinian-informed heuristic

The three Bakhtinian concepts of dialogic, authoritative voice and internally persuasive discourse, and heteroglossia are used to build an interpretivist framework, a heuristic for exploring the meanings of feedback in Chapters 5-7, in order help answer the research questions (1.3; *Appendix 1*) posed in this study. Such a heuristic enables me to approach data from an interpretivist perspective, alongside a realist perspective, as I discuss in 4.6.1. The relationship between these Bakhtinian concepts and my research questions is explained below and their operationalisation, described above, is summarised in Table 3.1 at the end of this section. The focus of my research questions is to explore the perspectives of all participants in the feedback process.

Firstly, Bakhtin's fundamental concept of dialogism, that all interaction in speech and writing is potentially dialogic, ongoing and directed towards a response, but can be monologic, due to the way it is enacted (3.3.2), is central to my exploration of the perceptions of interaction between participants around feedback. The data generated in the study on which this thesis is based is explored in relation to the first key question (Table 3.1): *To what extent is the dialogue that exists around feedback practices dialogic*

*(in Bakhtinian terms)?* This question encompasses consideration of the extent to which dialogic communication around feedback is expected or desired by participants within the particular context of assessment studied.

Secondly, an ongoing tension between an authoritative voice and internally persuasive discourse relates to my exploration of authoritative relationships between participants and potential hierarchies in the feedback process ([Figure 1.1](#)). The relationship between a concept of agency and Bakhtin's notions of answerability and internally persuasive discourse is discussed above (3.3.3). The second key question ([Table 3.1](#)) here is: *To what extent are particular voices perceived as authoritative and what evidence is there of the development of internally persuasive discourse?*

Thirdly, the operationalisation of Bakhtin's notion of heteroglossia as a range of influencing voices, affecting the perspectives of participants in the feedback process, is fundamental to all research questions, considering student, tutor and institutional perspectives. The third key question ([Table 3.1](#)) is: *Are there a range of voices that influence participants' perspectives around feedback practices?*

Table 3.1:

A Bakhtinian-informed heuristic for exploring perspectives around feedback practices

Research questions	Bakhtinian concept: <u>LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION AS DIALOGIC</u>  <i>To what extent is the interaction that exists around feedback practices dialogic (in Bakhtinian terms)?</i>	Bakhtinian concept: <u>AUTHORITATIVE VOICE AND INTERNALLY PERSUASIVE DISCOURSE</u>  <i>To what extent are particular voices perceived as authoritative and what evidence is there of the development of internally persuasive discourse?</i>	Bakhtinian concept: <u>HETEROGLOSSIA</u>  <i>Are there a range of voices that influence participants' perspectives around feedback practices?</i>
<b><i>What are students' perspectives around feedback on assessed writing?</i></b>	Discussed in: <b>5.3.1; 5.4</b>	Discussed in: <b>5.3.2; 5.4</b>	Discussed in: <b>5.3.3; 5.4</b>
<b><i>What are tutors' perspectives around feedback on assessed writing?</i></b>	Discussed in: <b>6.3.1; 6.4</b>	Discussed in: <b>6.3.2; 6.4</b>	Discussed in: <b>6.3.3; 6.4</b>
<b><i>What are the institution's perspectives around feedback on assessed writing?</i></b>	Discussed in: <b>7.3.1; 7.4</b>	Discussed in: <b>7.3.2; 7.4</b>	Discussed in: <b>7.3.3; 7.4</b>
<b><i>To what extent are there multiple perspectives around feedback on assessed writing?</i></b>	Discussed in: <b>8.2.1; 8.2.4</b>	Discussed in: <b>8.2.2; 8.2.4</b>	Discussed in: <b>8.2.3; 8.2.4</b>

### 3.4 Summary

This chapter began by exploring the use of dialogue/ic in literature on feedback, focusing on the issues of clarity of institutionally-valued expectations of assessed writing and interpretations of what it means to see language and communication as dialogic in Bakhtin's terms (3.2). I then discussed my rationale for adopting Bakhtinian notions as a heuristic for exploring this study's findings (3.3). I identified Bakhtinian-related concepts of language and communication as dialogic (3.3.2), authoritative voice and internally persuasive discourse (3.3.3), and heteroglossia (3.3.4) as being key to providing an exploratory framework for my study's data. I presented a series of questions to explore in my discussion of findings (Chapters 5-7) in relation to these Bakhtinian notions and in responding to my research questions, as summarised in Table 3.1.

The next chapter describes and explains the rationale for the methodology and methods I employed to explore my research questions.

# **CHAPTER 4**

## **METHODOLOGY AND METHODS**

### **4.1 Introduction**

I begin this chapter by returning to my research questions (4.2), before outlining why a broadly ethnographic methodology informed my research design (4.3) and explaining my rationale for this design (4.4). I then describe the range and process of data collection, including the selection of participants (4.5). I outline the methods used to analyse data from questionnaires (4.6.1), interviews (4.6.2) and other data sources (4.6.3). I then consider ethical issues (4.7) and reflect on the position of myself as ‘insider’ researcher (4.8).

### **4.2 Aims of the investigation**

My **research questions** (1.3; *Appendix 1*) are re-stated below.

- 1. What are students’ perspectives around feedback practices on assessed writing?**
- 2. What are tutors’ perspectives around feedback practices on assessed writing?**
- 3. What are the institution’s perspectives around feedback practices on assessed writing?**



On the basis of findings emerging from the three empirical research questions, my aim was to explore two further questions.

**4. To what extent are there multiple perspectives around feedback practices on assessed writing?**

A reflection question addresses the pedagogical relevance of my study.

**5. What are the implications of the findings for the teaching and learning of discipline-based assessed writing?**

### **4.3 Methodological framework**

I sought a methodology that would enable me to, firstly, investigate participants' perspectives, without starting from a prior assumption about feedback as necessarily being about a problem requiring a solution, as I identified to be the case in some empirical studies and pedagogical discussions (2.5) and, secondly, to explore complexities around feedback, such as conflicting perspectives between participants. I decided that a broadly ethnographic orientation would be most suited to this context because it would allow me to access the accounts of the lived experiences (3.3.4) of participants.

My methodology was informed by the ethnographic principles of being exploratory, interpretive and concerned with context (Blommaert, 2007). My research was fundamentally exploratory, aiming to investigate participants' perspectives non-judgementally (1.2.4 and see Hammersley, 1992). In so doing, I recognised the need to address complexities (Blommaert, 2007) and to incorporate multiple methods of data collection (Lillis, 2008 355; Shaw *et al*, 2015:10;) with the aim of gaining as rich data as

feasible. Li and De Luca (2014:391 and see 2.3/2.4.2) recommend multiple methods of data collection for “a holistic picture” when exploring aspects of assessment practice.

I recognised tensions between emic and etic perspectives, by which I mean I foregrounded the perspectives of participants in my research data collection and analysis, which Rampton *et al* (2015:15) refer to as “tacit and articulated understandings”, whilst aware of my position as ‘insider’ researcher (4.8).

My study is context-sensitive, confining my data to one context of its production, with which it is integrated (Blommaert, 2007), whilst also recognising how practices are “embedded in wider social contexts and structures” (Shaw *et al*, 2015: 7). Paxton and Frith (2014:171) consider this exploration of social practices as a “lens” brought to ethnography by Academic Literacies (see 1.2.4 and 3.2), the two approaches being mutually supportive. Academic Literacies emphasises the significance of the social context of the production of academic writing and text as social practice (Lillis and Scott, 2007; Lea, 2004; Lea and Street, 1998) and, therefore, with the lived experiences (3.3.4) of participants, exemplified, as discussed, in Tuck’s (2013) ethnographic study of the contexts within which HE teachers engage with student writing (see 2.2 and 2.4.3).

My research epistemology can be described as realist and interpretivist (after Lather, 1991). My realist orientation is evident in the treatment of feedback as a ‘given’, that is as a real phenomenon in the social world, as something that participants (and I as tutor-researcher) ‘know’, have experience in and can meaningfully comment on. Comments about feedback are therefore at one level accepted as transparently meaningful. This realist approach is most obvious in my use of questionnaires to elicit information and perspectives and which I treat as self-evidently meaningful on analysis, for example Tables 5.1 and 5.2 representing findings. My interpretivist orientation involves

exploring and questioning what we mean by feedback, in particular in attempts to explore what a dialogic orientation to understanding feedback involves, and to do this I use the Bakhtinian heuristic I set out in Chapter 3. I return to this realist-interpretivist approach in my explanation of methods of data analysis in 4.6.

Below (4.4) I summarise the design of my study and how an ethnographic approach informed my choice of methods of data collection.

## **4.4 Designing the study**

### **4.4.1 Introducing the design**

I begin this section by explaining the rationale for decisions I made about this study's design to best address my research questions. I then describe each method of data collection, reflecting how an ethnographic methodology informed their selection and design (4.4.2-4.4.5); I explain the relative importance of each method, in relation to my research questions.

My primary data source was semi-structured interviews to enable me to explore emic perspectives evident in participants' own accounts. However, my investigations began with a broad survey amongst the student cohort, through questionnaires sent electronically. I later gave similar questionnaires to all tutor participants and to two of the three central academic participants, prior to their interviews. I saw the use of questionnaires as a starting point for identifying issues of broad concern, key aspects of which were then explored in detail with a small number of participants. Data from all data sources are used in analysis (Chapter 5, 6 and 7).

#### 4.4.2 Questionnaires

Questionnaires/surveys are used frequently for eliciting viewpoints around feedback practices, such as by Crimmins *et al* (2016), regarding student-teacher relationships, Pereira *et al* (2016), concerning the effectiveness and relevance of feedback on a variety of assessments, including written assignments, and Court (2014), when evaluating an experiment regarding provision of feedback on draft essays. Wingate's (2010) use of questionnaires to evaluate the impact of formative assessment via a student questionnaire, using a five-point scale to facilitate quantitative analysis, received a similar response rate to the student questionnaire in my study.

Questionnaires (*Appendices 3.4, 4.5 and 5.1*) in my study were intended, firstly, to provide an insight into broad themes that I considered fundamental in exploring multiple perspectives around feedback practices. These included what participants perceive as 'helpful'/'unhelpful' feedback (see [Table 4.1](#) at the end of this section) and to what extent there is student-tutor interaction following formal, written feedback on assessed writing. Secondly, questionnaires were intended to provide a basis from which to develop more in-depth qualitative exploration within semi-structured interviews (4.4.3). [Table 4.1](#) illustrates one example of how follow-up interview questions were developed from the questionnaire for the different participant groups.

##### *Student questionnaire*

The student questionnaire (*Appendix 3.4*) comprised 14 questions, with sub-sections. Most (11) of the questions were 'forced' and closed with 'tick-box' options and three requested a specific answer. Mainly closed questions were chosen for speed and ease (and therefore assumed likelihood) of response and for comparability between participant groups. As discussed above and illustrated in [Table 4.1](#), it was envisaged

that responses would then form a potential basis for open and semi-structured follow-up interview questions. At the end of the questionnaire, students were given space for 'any further comments'.

The questionnaire was intended to address my research questions in providing an initial exploration of issues related to perspectives around feedback practices. These included: the general extent of engagement in student-tutor and student-student contact, for example, through face-to-face tutorial attendance; the perceived extent of engagement with feedback provided; the preferred method of any student-tutor interaction around feedback; the perceived extent of other communication around study and feedback, aside from with the tutor (such as with peers, social networks); the value attached to other sources of feedback, with attempts to encourage specific detail; how feedback value relates to personal reasons for study; other influences on perspectives regarding feedback on assessed writing. Finally, the questionnaire established the willingness and availability to participate in the semi-structured interviews.

The questionnaire was prepared with a covering email invitation (*Appendix 3.3*) from my supervisor and a 'welcome' letter from me, advising completion should take about 15 minutes. Covering letters explained the research purpose; Homan (2002) considers doing so to be an important ethical issue. (All such communication received ethical [Human Research Ethics Committee, HREC] approval; see *Appendix 6.3*. Ethical considerations are discussed further in 4.7.)

The questionnaire was tested with three experienced ex-students within the University's language/literature pathways. All three student-testers emailed permission for their anonymised opinions to be quoted. Student-testers were asked

particularly to consider: timing of questionnaire completion (as I was wary of possible “deceit” [Homan, 2002:25] through exaggerating lack of imposition on time); use of ‘forced’ responses (also discussed with the SRPP); broaching the question of use of social networks, suspected to be a contentious issue from anecdotal evidence (discussed further in 4.4.3).

Student-testers confirmed completion time ranged from 10-13 minutes. They accepted the necessity of forced responses, one commenting, “if the question wasn’t forced, then they could simply ignore”. My concerns that informants would be wary of answering the ‘social network’ question (see *Appendix 3.4*), because of fears of possible disapproval or even reprisals, in view of general plagiarism warnings from the University, despite the anonymity of questionnaires, were shared:

“I suspect they will be more willing to mention the moodle forums on the official website than Facebook or other non-academic sites.”

(Student tester 1)

“On this one, I think we’re on very shaky grounds! ... I feel interviewees<sup>4</sup> will be less than honest. In my experience, the fear of being accused of plagiarism/cheating is a very real fear...I feel the majority would not admit to using support, especially from social networking groups.” (Student tester 2)

Student tester 2 felt that the options should not specify *Facebook* to “encourage honesty”. However, I decided to leave the specificity and match with a question to

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<sup>4</sup> Student tester’s term; questionnaires were being tested, not interview scripts

tutors but felt that the advice to be wary here was helpful for conducting follow-up interviews with student participants.

I recognised that only a small proportion of the 52 cohort-wide student participants who had completed questionnaires would both agree to and be subsequently available for interview. For the majority of participants, for whom I would have only questionnaire data, I wanted some straightforward but fundamental answers related to my research questions. For example, I began my student questionnaire (*Appendix 3.4*) with closed questions, asking whether feedback comments are read at all and whether consulted when preparing future assessed work. (Quantitative analysis of the student questionnaire results is discussed in Chapter 5 and attached in full [*Appendix 7*]).

#### *Tutor questionnaire*

A version of the student questionnaire was adapted for completion by all five tutors in my sample (*Appendix 4.5*). My research questions (1.3; 4.2; *Appendix 1*), my literature review (Chapter 2) and the desire to ‘match’ questions with the student questionnaire for comparability between participant groups underpinned this adaptation.

The tutor questionnaire included more open questions, as I assumed tutors would be more likely to respond to these than students, because there had been personal (email) agreement with me, as a known tutor colleague, beforehand; for example:

*How far do you feel that feedback practices on [the studied course] are specified by the Region<sup>5</sup> and/or the module team?*

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<sup>5</sup> At the time of data collection, staff responsible for the local management of tutoring (so tutor appointments and student-tutor relationships) were based in regional offices around the country. This group of academics are represented by central academic, Sam, in my study (see 4.5.1, *Table 4.5* and Chapter 7).

(This question was asked to try to interrelate with the proposed exploration of institutional perspectives and with the research interest in hierarchies and authoritative voices around the feedback process [Figure 1.1; 2.5; 3.3]). Again, closed questions were also used for specificity, comparability and to reduce imposition on completion time. The tutor questionnaire was not pre-tested, as the sample was so small that any error would not limit research significantly; moreover, tutors were more willing to participate than students for further exploratory interviews.

#### *Central academic questionnaire*

Again, a questionnaire was adapted for use with central academics (*Appendix 5.1*), representing institutional perspectives, but in view of their lack of direct teaching contact with students, I recognised that the relevance of replicating student-tutor questions was limited. Moreover, I envisaged that questionnaires would not comprise such a valuable data source for central academics, as comparable questions regarding experiences of feedback were not so relevant to them and would not feed into interview questions to the same extent as with the other two participant groups. Further, only two out of the three central academic participants completed questionnaires (see [Table 4.6](#)). After some consideration, I decided that official documentation would represent a more useful secondary data source for exploring the institutional perspectives. The rationale for the selection of specific participants and specific numbers of participants is outlined in 4.5.1.



Table 4.1: 'helpful'/'unhelpful' feedback? Sample questionnaire/interview questions

<b>PARTICIPANT GROUP</b>	<b>QUESTIONNAIRE QUESTION</b> (Appendices 3.4; 4.5; 5.1)	<b>INTERVIEW QUESTION</b>
<b>Students</b>	<i>What has been the most helpful example of feedback or advice concerning your academic work<sup>6</sup> that you have received?</i>	<i>You mentioned that x comment] was unhelpful, why did you think this comment wasn't useful to you?</i>  (Appendix 3.5)
<b>Tutors</b>	<i>Can you provide one example of feedback on an assignment that you have given which has proved to be effective? (...without identifying a particular student by name)</i>	For this category, there was no specific scripted comment, as questions tended to pick up individual tutor comments about discussions around feedback, for example, to tutor Alice: <i>So you mention an instance where this has gone really well, so someone presents an argument in a more effective way...?</i>
<b>Central academics</b>	<i>What type of feedback do you perceive as most effective? Try to give one specific example but please do not mention a particular student or tutor.</i>	<i>You mentioned that you felt [x] is particularly effective. Can you say a little more about that?</i>  (Appendix 5.2)

<sup>6</sup> The term 'work' was used in the questions but, as explained in Chapter 1, this feedback is consistently applied to assessed writing

In terms of the relative importance of data sources, then, I considered semi-structured interviews the principal one for all participant groups, discussed below.

#### 4.4.3 Interviews

Semi-structured interviews, my main data source, are traditionally seen as linked with ethnography (Lillis, 2008:255). I saw the semi-structured nature as, firstly, allowing for a basic plan of what to cover in relation to research questions and building on questionnaire responses. Secondly, they also allow for an “open-ended” interview discussion, “designed to understand people’s perspectives” (Hammersley, 2006:4) and to “do justice” to these perspectives, a key feature of ethnography (Blommaert, 2007:682). In-depth interviews are chosen by researchers wanting to seek out views on specific issues, such as Pitt and Norton’s (2017) interviews with 14 undergraduates to reflect on their perceptions of feedback (see 2.4.2) and Carless *et al* (2011:395) in their search for tutors’ views on “sustainable feedback” (see 2.4.3).

Hammersley (2006) reports that interviews are argued by some ethnographers to be uniquely effective in eliciting participants’ perspectives, because they facilitate the interpretation of what is said within the context of biographical experiences, as was my aim within this study. Similarly, Shields (2015 and see 2.4.2) used semi-structured interviews with first-year undergraduates to gauge the emotional impact of feedback, examining interview “narratives” (page 614) in relation to, for example, prior experience of education and how an interpretation of community connects with the concept of students themselves as learners.

Below, I explain my rationale for the different types of interview question.

### *Interview questions common to all participants*

All participants were asked the same initial question:

*I wonder what you understand by 'academic writing'? – What does this mean to you?*

(Appendix 12 comprises all interviewees' responses [just] to this one question.)

I perceived participants' awareness of discourses around and perspectives on the nature of academic writing to be fundamental to exploring assumptions about the purpose and value of feedback. Whilst the basic interview scripts varied for each participant group (*Appendices 3.5; 4.6; 5.2*), according to their roles, I wanted this first question to be identical to all to facilitate a comparative analysis of perspectives.

The questionnaire finished with the other common question:

*Finally, is there anything else you would like to say?*

This question was in accordance with my primary intention to explore what was important to participants, in accordance with related research questions.

### *Interview questions contingent upon questionnaire responses*

Generally, interview questions were designed to build on questionnaire responses, as illustrated in [Table 4.1](#). Pereira *et al* (2016:13) reflect critically about their evaluation of data collected via questionnaires only in their own study, noting that interviews might have clarified students' perspectives, regarding the effectiveness and relevance of feedback. Such contingency upon questionnaire responses could be viewed as offering a longitudinal dimension to my study, an element with a time lapse before the subsequent interview and building upon the foundation of some prior contact with participants. This is somewhat similar, in a limited way, to Tuck's second interviews,

observations and field notes which she used to try to ascertain whether participants' stated perspectives were a "one-off" (Tuck, 2013:9). A "sustained engagement in research sites" is considered important in ethnography (Lillis, 2008:382), in order to avoid claims based on 'one-off comments' and to engage more fully with people's perspectives. One example in my study of interview questions being contingent upon questionnaire responses regarded students' use of social media. This was phrased indirectly as it was recognised as a contentious issue generally, as evidenced by the student testers' comments (4.4.2). In my role as tutor, social media usage had been expressed to me as a problem by students, tutors and central academics because of potential conflicts with tutor advice, for example, regarding interpretations of assignment task instructions. Therefore, I attempted to explore perceptions of the significance of social media as an influencing 'voice', but without suggestions originating from me. For example, my scripted question to central academic interviewees was (Appendix 5.2):

*You felt that advice students might get from (other/specify) sources is/is not helpful and suggested because...(ask to expand – "can you say a little bit more about that?"/"Why do you think this is the case?"*)

To summarise, then, interviews were the primary data source for all participant groups, supported by questionnaires, which were a secondary source for students and tutors. Other data sources for each participant group are described below.

#### 4.4.4 Other data sources

Aware of the value attached to the use of multiple data sources in ethnography (Lillis, 2008:355), I considered three further sources of data that were available to me and

might usefully inform my exploration. These were: student demographics; tutor online forum contributions and official institutional documentation (and see [Table 4.2](#)). Information on student demographics, such as gender, socio-economic group and also students' reasons for study (complete list: *Appendix 3.6*), derived from University registration and this data were readily available. In an attempt to enrich data from my tutor participants, I requested permission (*Appendix 4.2*) to retain and use contributions from tutor interviewees to the online tutor forum, within which tutors were encouraged to discuss module-related matters. Lastly, I analysed short extracts from official documentation where feedback was mentioned, as detailed in 4.5.3. These were envisaged as an important secondary data source to supplement interview data from central academics in the exploration of institutional perspectives. According to Hammersley (2006:4), ethnography sometimes complements interview data with studies of publicly available documentation.

#### 4.4.5 Summary: multiple data sources

Summarising, a broadly ethnographic orientation towards data collection led me to examine a range of sources. Data from each key perspective, students', tutors' and the institution's, were comprised of semi-structured interviews, supported by questionnaire data and another data source. [Table 4.2](#) summarises intended data sources, mapped against research questions.

Table 4.2: Intended data sources, mapped against research questions

<b><u>Participant group</u></b>	<b><u>Primary data source</u></b>	<b><u>Secondary data source</u></b>	<b><u>Other data sources</u></b>
<b><u>Students:</u></b>  <b>Research question:</b> <i>What are students' perspectives around feedback on academic writing?</i>	Semi-structured interviews with volunteers, following questionnaire completion	Questionnaires	Demographics available upon University registration for all student participants (UD)
<b><u>Tutors</u></b>  <b>Research question:</b> <i>What are tutors' perspectives around feedback on academic writing?</i>	Semi-structured interviews with volunteers	Questionnaires	Online forum contributions (from interviewees)
<b><u>Central academics</u></b>  <b>Research question:</b> <i>What are the institution's perspectives around feedback on academic writing?</i>	Semi-structured interviews with selected volunteer staff	Extracts from official documentation	Questionnaires

The next section describes the actual data collection process, including the selection, biographical details and, in the case of central academics, institutional roles of participants.

## **4.5 Process of data collection**

### **4.5.1 The participants: sample, scope and scale**

I decided to focus my exploration within a specific context. All participants and documentation involved in generating data were confined to the first cohort of a second-year English language module on which I tutored, as detailed in 1.2.2. Such focus on one module is the choice in other empirical research, such as Adcroft and Willis's (2013) longitudinal experiment surrounding enquiry-based feedback (see 2.5) and it appears usual to select whole cohorts initially when investigating feedback practices (Bloxham and Campbell, 2010; Crisp, 2007).

#### *Student questionnaire participants*

Whilst a large sample was not considered necessary for my small-scale, exploratory and mainly qualitative, ethnographic study, I wanted to ensure sufficient participation to obtain a range of responses and to identify students who would agree to further involvement. Therefore, the questionnaire (*Appendix 3.4*) was sent to 200 students. They were selected randomly from the above-mentioned cohort; excepted were those who had opted out of research/mailings or had been surveyed in the previous month or twice in the past year in accordance with data protection requirements and Student Research Project Panel (SRPP, 2012) protocol. Further, I decided to omit students from my own tutor group, as I considered that responses from these students might be

compromised by my grading of their work and affected by our prior relationship. All students surveyed, therefore, had had no prior contact with me, the researcher. An email reminder was sent after two weeks and the survey was closed after a further three weeks.

A total of 52 (26%) students responded to the questionnaire. Nine (4.5%) incomplete responses were received. 31 of these respondents agreed to a follow up interview. (Nine were subsequently available.)

As explained (4.4.4), demographic information was available to me for these 52 students, from their University registration (*Appendix 3.6*). I recognised that as the survey was sent to randomly selected students and their response was voluntary, the social variables of respondents might not be representative of the entire cohort. In accordance with ethnographic principles, I did not pre-select interviewees according to social variables. Rather, I believe that the make-up of the random selection should be acknowledged within the context of any attempt to generalise findings and it is important to be transparent in this respect about the limitations of data (see 8.4), when making claims for any wider implications of my study. Therefore, I describe here the demographics of questionnaire respondents in relation to the cohort as a whole (The Open University, 2012c).

There was a high proportion (56%) already possessing HE qualifications in my study, compared to 24 per cent in the whole cohort. Further, there were a relatively small proportion of younger students in my sample (two per cent were under 25, none of whom agreed to a follow-up interview). My sample is 'older'; only seven per cent of the entire cohort were over sixty years old, as opposed to 27 per cent of my sample (see the



table in *Appendix 3.1*). The gender split of my study, however, broadly matches whole cohort percentages (see *Appendix 3.2*) (The Open University, 2012c).

#### *Student interviewees*

Of the 31 questionnaire respondents who agreed to a follow-up interview, nine students, four female, five male, responded to further contact and were subsequently available for a telephone interview. The basic interview script with its rationale (*Appendix 3.5*) was approved by the SRPP. Student interviewees' biographical details are summarised in Table 4.3, indicating age group, previous and current employment, previous study, qualification for which the student registered and declared study goal. Sources for this data are the University's registration records, questionnaires, interviews and, in all cases, information which the students were willing to reveal. These details are pertinent when considering the potential 'voices' of past experiences that influence participants' perspectives around feedback practices, relating to the Bakhtinian notion of heteroglossia (see 3.3.4 and Table 3.1).

**Table 4.3: Student interviewees: biographical details**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Age group</b>	<b>Previous employment</b>	<b>Current employment</b>	<b>Previous study/Qualifications</b>	<b>Registered for</b>	<b>Student comment on study goal</b>
<b>Ben</b>	66+	Government department	Retired	A levels	Bachelor degree (no details available)	“to widen my knowledge of the English language” (Questionnaire)
<b>Carl</b>	61-65	-	Chef Manager	0 levels, 1xA level + Catering qualification	BA (Hons) English	Personal development only stated (Questionnaire) although on registration had declared career/personal development as equally important
<b>Dawn</b>	61-65	University Language Coordinator	University Teaching Assistant, describes self as “a teacher, not an academic”	Degree Two x Masters – Education and Russian	BA (Hons), Humanities	“personal interest” (questionnaire)
<b>Julie</b>	61-65	Project Manager, IT services	Retired	Degree (UK)	BA (Hons) Modern Languages	“Interest in modern languages” (Questionnaire) “doing it for pleasure” (Interview)
<b>Martin</b>	61-65	Design engineer	Retired	HNC	BA, Modern Languages	“a compulsory module for my degree course” (questionnaire)
<b>Mary</b>	41-45	-	Tutor of English to Speakers of Other Languages	A levels	BA (Hons), Modern Languages	“gain a fuller understanding of how the English language is structured and used out of personal interest and for professional use (questionnaire)
<b>Phil</b>	41-45	-	IT Consultant (full time)	Degree in Computer Studies	BA (Hons) English language/literature	States that the module is a compulsory part of his degree (Questionnaire)
<b>Rose</b>	66+	Accounts Office Manager	Retired	O Level equivalent (none since)	BA (Hons), Humanities	Motivation of ‘mainly personal development’ repeated in questionnaire
<b>Tom</b>	51-55	Firefighter	Retired	GCSE equivalent (none since)	BA (Hons) Humanities	“to gain the requisite amount for my degree and to complement my music modules” (Questionnaire)

### *Tutor participants*

Five tutors participated in this research: Andrew, John, Cath, Alice and Vera (pseudonyms). This number was both practical in terms of tutors eligible and willing to participate (as explained below) and appropriate, in relation to the ratio of students to tutors in the cohort as a whole. All five tutors completed questionnaires, were subsequently interviewed and gave permission for use of their online forum contributions. Below, I explain how they were selected as participants and present their brief biographical details ([Table 4.4](#)). Data sources cited are interviews, unless otherwise acknowledged.

I outlined my research at a briefing meeting for all tutors who might potentially tutor this module. I asked those who were willing to sign a consent form ([Appendix 4.2](#)) to allow my anonymous use of their contributions to our online tutor forum. Consenting tutors who actually tutored this module were asked if they would agree to participate further in my research ([Appendix 4.3](#)). I considered it important that they remained tutoring between then and the time of interview for consistency and in case I needed to check further details. Tutors Andrew, John, Cath, Alice and Vera agreed and were available to participate.

I attempted to match biographical information for tutor participants with that I had from students, where appropriate. However, I realised that an attempt to include similar biographical details for tutors as I had for students might compromise the anonymity of tutor participants, which was more likely than with students, due to tutors' smaller numbers. Therefore, I decided to ask tutor participants what information they would be willing for me to include, so that they could, at least, retain

control over what personal details were linked with information provided. I suggested the categories of age (range), experience as a tutor with the OU, other work (past and present) and any current studies. Age and employment details were included, as these are variables that I had for student participants. Past and previous employment and any current study are pertinent within a consideration of multiple 'voices', potentially influencing perspectives. Years spent in the tutoring role are relevant when considering experiences informing their interview comments.

Table 4.4: Tutor participants: biographical details (as supplied by themselves)

<b>Name</b>	<b>Age (range)</b>	<b>Years tutored for the University</b>	<b>Other current work</b>	<b>Past work</b>	<b>Studying currently?</b>
<b>Andrew</b>	71	11	None	11-18 Comprehensive school: Head of English; Senior Tutor; Pastoral Deputy Head teacher	<u>Yes</u> Professional doctorate
<b>John</b>	65	11	Teaches and judges ballroom dancing; dance press reporter; dance-world committees	Lithographic printer (17 years); police officer (30 years); adult literacy/numeracy tutor (1 year); English to Speakers of Other Languages tutor (2 years)	<u>Yes</u> MA in Education + further dance examiner qualifications + European languages
<b>Cath</b>	Mid-forties	4.5	Monitor of tutor feedback for same University	Adult Education tutor; Further Education tutor; Housing Officer	<u>No</u>
<b>Alice</b>	60-65 range	4	Voluntary work	Lecturer in HE	<u>No</u>
<b>Vera</b>	55	7	Consultancy work for the same University	College lecturer, English for Academic Purposes (5 years); Italian teacher (10 years)	<u>Yes</u> MA in Online and Distance Education (second Masters)

### *Central academic<sup>7</sup> participants*

Due to the diverse roles of participants within this category, representing the institution, selecting a label was problematic. 'Central academics' was chosen, relating to academics with institutional responsibilities for management or curriculum, assessment and appointment of tutors. Two central academic participants were based at the University headquarters in Milton Keynes and the other was based in one of the geographical regions through which the OU organised local tuition. It is recognised that 'central academic' is not a homogenous group in terms of roles, in the same way as 'tutors' and 'students' could be argued to be, and the implications of this complexity for the pedagogical implications of findings are considered in Chapter 8.

Three central academics were interviewed: Sam, Alex and Pat. Again, as with tutors, this number was selected for both practical reasons and as appropriate in relation to the relatively smaller (than tutors and students) numbers of central academics involved with this module and cohort. I sought a representative willing to participate from each of three different types of senior central academic roles within the OU. Sam, based outside Milton Keynes in one of the regional offices, was predominantly responsible for the delivery, rather than the content, of the modules, the appointment of tutors and management of tutor-student professional relationships. Alex represented the module team, as an academic based centrally at the University headquarters in Milton Keynes, rather than regionally out-based, like Sam. Alex was responsible for designing and supervising the module content and assessment and monitoring tutoring feedback on assessed writing. Pat was a senior academic member of the Faculty administration,

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<sup>7</sup> It should be noted that the term 'central academic' as used in this thesis is different from its common use by OU staff. Within the OU, it generally refers to those academics solely based in Milton Keynes.

also based centrally at the Milton Keynes headquarters, and was partly responsible for setting parameters within which participants from the other two participant groups, tutors and students, operated within the Faculty. The roles of these three central academic participants are summarised in [Table 4.5](#), which also clarifies data collected for each, as this differs slightly between central academics, since Pat did not complete a questionnaire. (See also [Table 4.6](#).) Biographical details, similar to those provided for themselves by tutors, are not included for central academics, in order not to compromise anonymity for these relatively high profile participants.

**Table 4.5: Central academic participants: roles and responsibilities**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Alex</b>	<b>Sam</b>	<b>Pat</b>
<b>Representing role of</b>	Senior module team member, centrally based	Regional Management, regionally based	Faculty senior management, centrally based
<b>Responsibilities involve</b>	Design of module content and its assessment and delivery by tutors	Management of module delivery, appointment of tutors and tutor-student relationships	Based on University policy, overall management of systems within the Faculty, including assessment
<b>Input into studied module design and official documentation</b>	Yes (into module design and <i>The Assessment Guide</i> (The Open University, 2012a))	No	Yes (into official documentation)
<b>Data collected</b>	Questionnaire, Interview	Questionnaire, Interview	Interview

#### 4.5.2 Participants as group representatives

I decided to term my respondents ‘participants’, rather than, for example, ‘informants’, to suggest their involvement in the research process (Lee, 2001), which I tried to emphasise, such as by offering to share findings with interviewees. It seems important to acknowledge that these self-selected participants do not represent all the views of their respective participant groups. I see these three participant categories, of students, tutors and central academics, as equating to what Schofield (2007:189) terms “typical” sites, and that such typicality, whilst it cannot ensure generalizability, as no experienced tutors or students studying the same module can be typical of all variables of these three groups, is “useful”, as “a guiding principle designed to increase the potential applicability of research” (page 190). Schofield recommends, then, to combine such categorization with “thick description” of individual contexts, as I have attempted to do here, through presentation of demographic and biographical information, as is compatible with ethnographic principles.

#### 4.5.3 Other data sources

As summarised in [Table 4.6](#) at the end of this section, other data sources supporting the key data from semi-structured interviews for students and tutors were demographic information for the whole student cohort from University registration and tutors’ online forum contributions respectively. However, in the event, data from these forum postings were of limited value as analysis indicated that tutor participants had made few contributions there in relation to feedback practices.



As mentioned (4.4.4), extracts from official documentation were considered potentially valuable data as a secondary source for the exploration of institutional perspectives. Course documentation is used in studies to ascertain factual information about feedback requirements, such as collected by Adams and McNab (2012), investigating students' experiences of assessment feedback to supplement an interview with a programme leader. I wanted also to look at the nature of what I consider to be encoded authority within this official documentation, that is authoritative voices conveyed through language choice, and here I found Angelil-Carter and Murray's (2006) analysis of a Student Handbook (within the University of Cape Town) pertinent; my adaptation of their analytical methodology is discussed in 4.6.4.

I analysed only selected brief extracts from the documentation that related and appeared to indicate what is specified and valued around feedback practices by the institution. Document extracts comprised: a sample assignment task (*Appendix 10.1*), taken from the researched module's online *Assessment Guide* (The Open University, 2012a); the marking grid for assignments, indicating grading criteria, extracted from the same document (*Appendix 10.2*); the *Assessment Handbook* (The Open University, 2012b); the *Monitoring Handbook* (The Open University, 2011b). This handbook outlines the rationale and process for monitoring the quality of the prescribed, formal electronic formative and summative feedback and grading that tutors provide for each piece of students' assessed writing (see 1.4.2). It is intended for monitors, who are either members of the module team (like central academic participant, Alex) or experienced tutors (like Cath), who had undergone monitoring training. (Monitoring is explained and discussed further in Chapters 6 and 7).

#### 4.5.4 Overview of data collected

Planned data collection and its intended relative importance in terms of my research questions is summarised in Table 4.2, above. Table 4.6, below, summarises actual data collected (and analysed) in relation to the three key perspectives of students, tutors and the institution.

Table 4.6: Data collected and analysed in this thesis

<b>Perspectives</b>	<b>Primary data sources</b>	<b>Secondary data sources</b>	<b>Other data sources</b>	<b>Data discussed in</b>
<b>Students</b>	Nine semi-structured interviews	Nine questionnaires completed by interviewees. Demographic information for interviewees, supplied on University registration. 43 further questionnaires (so 52 in total) from the wider student cohort	Demographic information for the whole cohort from University registration.	Chapter 5
<b>Tutors</b>	Five semi-structured interviews	Questionnaires completed by interviewees. Demographic information, supplied by tutors themselves	Online forum contributions from the tutors interviewed	Chapter 6
<b>Institution</b>	Three semi-structured interviews with central academics	Extracts from official documentation	Questionnaires completed by two of the central academics interviewed	Chapter 7

## 4.6 Data analysis

### 4.6.1 Introducing the data analysis

In approaching the analysis of the range of quantitative and qualitative data I collected in this study ([Table 4.6](#)), epistemologically I finally adopted what can be summarised as a 'realist' and an 'interpretivist' approach (Lather, 1991). While I acknowledge that there is a significant debate surrounding these terms (see, for example, Ryan, 2018; Hammersley, 1992), my realist approach means that at one level I treat feedback as a 'given' that is as a real phenomenon in the social world, that it is possible to ask questions about and to treat answers to such questions as transparently meaningful. My interpretivist approach means that I aim to explore and question what participants intend when discussing feedback, using a theoretical lens: the lens I found most useful for my analysis was the work of Bakhtin, as set out in the heuristic in Chapter 3. In Chapter 3, I explained my operationalisation of the Bakhtinian notions of language and communication as dialogic, authoritative voice and internally persuasive discourse, and heteroglossia (and see [Table 3.1](#)). I explore my data within the framework of these concepts in Chapters 5-7. I attempt to operationalise Bakhtin's theories as a heuristic, as a lens through which to view and explore my data, aiming to fulfil one of my original goals and pedagogic concerns (1.2.4) of researching from a non-judgemental, non-prescriptive stance, through standing back and distancing myself from my 'insider' perspective (4.8) (and see Gade, 2016).

In the following sections, I explain the ways I adopted the realist and interpretivist approaches in carrying out data analysis of questionnaires, interviews and other data sources.

#### 4.6.2 Questionnaires

As explained (4.4.2), questionnaires were used as an initial exploration of issues related to feedback around assessed writing and as a potential basis for follow-up interview questions. For these reasons, and, as explained, for those of speed and ease and hence assumed likelihood of response, most of the questions were closed. The questionnaires, therefore, provided the main quantitative data. The full analysis of closed questions is appended (*Appendix 7*) and Chapter 5 includes basic statistical analysis of findings, using percentages and graphs in Figures and Tables. I supply evidence from responses to the open questionnaire questions to illustrate and support this presentation of quantitative data, as in Tables 5.1 and 5.2. Analysis was in relation to both content and also discourse (explained below) regarding the open questions, although most of the analysis of discourse related to interview transcriptions (see 4.6.3, below). The questionnaire data was analysed in respect of both ‘realist’ and ‘interpretivist’ frameworks (explained in 4.3 and 4.6.1). For example, realist analysis is evident in the presentation of findings in Tables and Figures where comments on feedback are treated as self-evidently meaningful, as in the finding that criticism from 14 per cent of student questionnaire respondents concerns insufficiently detailed feedback (Table 5.2). Interpretivist analysis is evident in my use of Bakhtinian concepts to try to explore meanings attached to feedback, as when I explore the extent to which student perspectives are shaped by authoritative voices (5.3.2).

#### 4.6.3 Interviews

Semi-structured interviews, my main data source, were intended to build on questionnaire questions and to facilitate more open-ended discussions, as explained in

4.4.3. They, too, were analysed in relation to both their content and discourse and within 'realist' and 'interpretivist' frameworks.

In approaching the data as 'discourse', I am following Gee's (1999:7) definition of the concept of discourse, which is "how language is used 'on site'". The idea of all language chosen within a discourse having lived before, described by Ivanič (1998:85) in her study of writing as a "rich stew" (and see 3.3.4), is fundamental to my own understanding of discourse, that

"any text (oral or written) is infected with the meanings (at least, as potential) of all other texts in which its words have comported" (Gee, 1999:55).

Gee (1990:145) argues that '**D**iscourse', which he associates with the language part of playing a role within a particular socially defined group (such as 'feminist', 'socialist'), infiltrates **d**iscourse to "speak to each other through individuals". Gee (1999:15) refers to projecting identity through language and to language as a process of construction of "worlds" (page 11).

An example from my study is student interviewee Martin appearing to position himself with the identity of an older person, using the Discourse of this socially defined group (Gee, 1990). Martin reflects on his younger self, by separating the 'now' and the 'then' in his language choices. Martin identifies himself as older with "life experience", removed from the "failed" encounters with academia and of his younger self: "I was twenty something then...I let myself down". Martin explains with a projection of identity that this was

“an age-related thing and a background-related thing in that I came from a typical working-class background”.

Approaching interview comments as discourse resonates fundamentally with Bakhtinian notions in terms of language choice being linked with the way individuals see the world (Halasek, 1999:4) and as language as “shot through with intentions” (Bakhtin, [1934/35],1981:293). A range of voices that influence participants are considered within the operationalisation of Bakhtin’s concept of heteroglossia ([1934/35], 1981:291 and see 3.3.4): “Each utterance is filled with the echoes and reverberations of other utterances” (Bakhtin, [1952-3],1994:91). Holquist (1990:15) views Bakhtin’s “philosophy” as

“one of several modern epistemologies that seek to grasp human behaviour through the use humans make of language”.

Further, I acknowledge that one influential voice on participants’ language choices might be the interviewer/interviewee relationship. As an ‘insider’ researcher (see 4.8), I recognised I needed to be careful not to lead interviewees in the sense of control of the direction of their comments. Therefore, in my data analysis (Chapters 5-7), I clarify when a particular language choice originates from within the interview context, rather than as a reflection of my own language choice as interviewer. For example, tutor Vera’s repeated reference to “standardisation”, a theme of her discourse (Chapter 6) was not a term introduced by me as interviewer, but by Vera, as in her comment: “there is no standardisation in the way we give feedback”.

My analysis of findings from interview transcripts is, therefore, mostly a thematic one, using the overarching interpretivist framework. It is organised broadly according to

three themes, relating to those generated from working with the Bakhtinian-informed heuristic ([Table 3.1](#)), regarding perspectives around language and communication as dialogic, authoritative voice and internally persuasive discourse, and heteroglossia.

My approach to this thematic analysis was to listen to interview recordings and to study transcriptions, interpreting how phrases might be grouped broadly according to these thematic categories, recognising overlaps, complexities and alternative possibilities of interpretation, where data was insufficient to make a judgement.

There was an exception to this thematic analysis of interview transcriptions. I applied a different interpretive approach, a specific tool, to the analysis of interview responses to the question regarding a definition of academic writing (see 4.4.3), which facilitated comparative analysis between participant groups (Chapter 8) for this potentially influential ‘voice’ on perspectives. I considered that the awareness of discourses around and the values of all participants associated with academic writing might inform perspectives towards feedback practices around students’ assessed writing, such as in relation to both what is expected and valued by tutors and targeted by students. I therefore chose to relate my analysis of perspectives of academic writing to Ivanič’s (2004:225) categorisation of six discourses underpinning approaches to academic writing (*Appendix 11*), which builds on Lea and Street’s (1998) work; I noted that multiple discourses might be drawn upon. A ‘skills’ discourse relates to Lea and Street’s (1998) ‘skills’ model, which views academic writing as context free. The ‘creativity’ discourse values context, style and self-expression and takes its models from literature (Ivanič, 2004). The ‘process’ approach focuses on the practical composition of texts. The ‘genre’ discourse specifies “a set of text-types shaped by social context” (page 232) and relates to Lea and Street’s (1998) ‘academic socialization’ model. The ‘social



practices' discourse sees writing as an event within a social context and is concerned with power relationships, relating to Street's (1995) discussion of ideologies underpinning academic writing and Barton's (1991 and 1994 in Ivanič, 2004) consideration of literacy in context. The 'sociopolitical' discourse takes a broader and more political view of context, arguing that genres are not ideologically neutral and considers awareness of how these are developed (Ivanič, 2004). This analysis is discussed in 5.3.3.1, 6.3.3.1 and 7.3.3.1 and see [Tables 5.3, 6.1 and 7.1](#).

#### 4.6.3.1 Approach to transcription

The advantages/disadvantages of types of transcription are much discussed (Slembrouck, 2007; Oliver *et al*, 2005; Bucholtz, 2000) and concern a continuum from a content-oriented transcription (Slembrouck, 2007), to one in which all interactional features, including paralanguage, are represented. Initially, my transcription included a substantial number of such features, but within the scope of an individual EdD thesis I recognised that transcribing in this way was too time-consuming and, importantly, the detail yielded was unnecessary for my specific research purposes, as Bucholtz (2000:1440) warns. Therefore, I decided to transcribe content primarily, and to do so throughout, as I considered consistency important. (See the transcription key in *Appendix 8* and an example of a transcribed interview in *Appendix 9*). I did indicate non-verbal responses, particularly laughter, as I considered this aided contextual understanding. Oliver *et al* (2005:1274) see such a largely denaturalized or content-oriented transcription focusing on interview substance as perhaps more in line with an emic perspective which concentrates on what is communicated, not how.

However, if during analysis, I felt that the manner of delivery was significant to content/message, such as in relation to emphasis, then I consulted the original audio recordings. For example, when interpreting a response by interviewee, Sam, as categorical, “I think what we have to do is”, I used underlining in the transcription to indicate an emphasis which affected meaning. My transcription decisions are summarised in *Appendix 8*.

#### 4.6.4 Other data sources

As explained (4.4.4), I made use of an additional data source available to me for each key perspective. Student demographics and tutor online forum contributions helped to support questionnaire and interview data for the student and tutor perspectives and are discussed alongside these in analysis (Chapters 5 and 6).

A key source of data to inform my exploration of institutional perspectives was brief extracts from official documentation relating to my third research question (and see Chapter 7). A tool that helped me to identify, in particular, the perspectives around hierarchical relationships and authoritative voices within the feedback process evident in this documentation was that designed by Angelil-Carter and Murray (2006:20-25). Their analysis of the power behind discourses in two short extracts from a Student Handbook is based on Fairclough’s critical discourse analysis (1992 in Angelil-Carter and Murray, 2006:17-18). For example, they identify implicit threats to an assessed outcome if students do not follow rules as encoded by degree of modality. The strong, categorical modality of ‘will’ implies penalties for non-conforming, as opposed to ‘should’, which suggests obligation without penalty attached (Table 4.7). Fairclough

(1999:205) claims: “It is increasingly through texts...that social control and social domination are excised”.

Angelil-Carter and Murray’s (2006) method focuses on identifying modality, politeness indicators (after Brown and Levinson, 1978), transitivity and use of metaphor. Table 4.7 summarises how Angelil-Carter and Murray (2006:20-5) consider these types of language feature might encode power relationships. For example, in considering institutional perspectives and authoritative voices (7.3.2), I discuss the use of the modal of obligation, ‘should’ in The Open University’s (2011b) *Monitoring Handbook*, guiding what is expected of comments in respect of monitoring<sup>8</sup> tutor feedback, which “**should** be relevant and unambiguous” (my emphasis) (page 6).

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<sup>8</sup> Monitoring of tutor feedback is an internal process which is explained and described in Chapter 6.

Table 4.7: Analytical tool: official documentation (based on Angelil-Carter and Murray, 2006:20-5)

Type of language feature	Example to signal power
Modals	Categorical modality e.g. “will” (penalties implied for non-conforming)  Also note e.g. “should” (indicating obligation, no penalties implied)
Politeness (negative and positive, Brown and Levinson, 1978)	Lack of politeness strategies, indicates powerful position (perhaps as no perceived need)
Transitivity	Passive (so no author, say, of punishments [like mark loss]), invisible power. Potentially powerful agents (tutors) are not named but students are named.
Embedded metaphor, hidden values through connotations of language choice	What is inherently valued (by the powerful)

## 4.7 Ethical considerations

Research design was mindful of the British Educational Research Association (BERA)’s (2011) and the HREC’s guidelines. All research documentation involving student participants was in accordance with the University’s Student Research Project Panel (SRPP, 2012) advice, working in conjunction with the ethics panel. Research was

approved by these bodies, as well as the University's Data Protection office (see *Appendix 6*). Further, I am most grateful to the SRPP for their continual help and support throughout the data collection process. They administered the student survey, so that, for data protection reasons, I had access to the contact details of only those students who agreed to further communication.

Privacy and anonymity were a priority in this study. Main concerns were that the approach to the research should be non-judgemental and that participants were free to comment without being identified. Assurance of confidentiality and anonymity were emphasised within the invitation to participate, email reminders and questionnaire introductions (*Appendices 3-5*) and were mentioned again when arranging semi-structured interviews (by email) and within interview scripts (*Appendices 3.5; 4.6; 5.2*). I have used pseudonyms for all participants. I tried to avoid participants mentioning particular persons by name throughout data collection, as indicated in the sample question in [Table 4.1](#), and if a name was mentioned during interview, this was not transcribed. My interview scripts included reminders to double-check with participants the acceptability of recording the interview to explain that data would be kept confidential and to recap on the ability to withdraw from the study.

Despite these precautions, one tutor discussed detail of her/his role in a recorded interview, that meant that s/he might be identified. Therefore, I asked her/his separate permission to include this information, to which s/he agreed, following Zeni's (2001:164) advice: "Collaboration and communication are the best guides to preventing the ethical dilemmas of practitioner research."

As explained (4.5.1), I checked with tutors their willingness for me to include biographical details that might compromise their anonymity. Extra caution was needed

to ensure that central academics were not identified with their data, as mentioned, because of their greater public profiles. Hence female/male pseudonyms (Alex, Sam, Pat) were chosen and, as explained (4.5.1), in discussing data from these participants (Chapters 7 and 8), these names are repeated, instead of personal pronouns (she/he).

## **4.8 Researcher positioning**

My study is ‘insider’ research, in that I had been a tutor within the researched institution for over ten years at the time I began my investigation (see 1.2.2). I tutored on the researched module. I had met in person my telephone interviewees from both ‘tutor’ and ‘central academic’ participant groups, at examination meetings, for example, and although I researched amongst students who did not know me and whose work had not been assessed by me, we still had much (assumed) shared knowledge/experience, through being participants in the cultural context of the OU. I was, therefore, far from an ‘outsider’, identified by Hellowell (2006:484-5) as a researcher unfamiliar with the setting.

Here, I briefly assess the extent to which my ‘insider’ perspective might have affected aspects of data collection and analysis, both in terms of opportunities and through my proceeding with data collection in a cautionary manner.

My ‘insider’ position is one key aspect of my researcher positioning. Shared understanding and consequent possible empathy, as derived from an ‘insider’ position, is perceived as a potential advantage within an ethnographic methodology (Blommaert, 2007:682), within which “studying at *first hand* what people do and say in particular

contexts” (Hammersley, 2006:4) is considered central and which Hammersley argues can be achieved “through relatively open-ended interviews”.

I recognise that a shared context saved much time in explanations during interviews and led to an assumed empathy between myself and participants, conducive to interviewee willingness to discuss issues of concern regarding feedback practices.

However, I also recognised that shared knowledge might lead to assumed and even inaccurate understanding and interpretation, so there was a constant need to be reflexive, with regard to acknowledging how far both data and its interpretation might be affected by my ‘insider’ status. For example, there is evidence, particularly from tutor interviews, that participants want to produce a “desired response”, what Murray and Lawrence (2000:31) term a “halo” effect, to which they consider qualitative methodologies are susceptible. Some tutors and central academics, all of whom, as mentioned above, I knew personally, asked me whether their answers were what I “wanted”; yet I was not asked similar from student interviewees who I did not know.

With regard to data interpretation and claims, Murray and Lawrence (2000:18-19), for example, warn against anecdote presented as “evidence”, such being one common reason cited against practitioner research. I therefore aimed for transparency in my discussion of findings and throughout the data analysis (Chapters 5-7), I attempted to balance both emic and etic perspectives. Moreover, I tried to be transparent about the rationale for my interpretations, by providing details around my data collection and analysis.

Concerns regarding researcher positioning and autonomy are linked closely to ethical considerations (4.7) and related are discussions by Hammersley (2014; Hammersley and Triaiianou, 2014), regarding a possible gap between participants’ understanding

and a researcher's actual intention, which Hammersley (2014:529) considers "deception". Tuck (2013), for example, expresses concern that her tutor participants might not have agreed to be interviewed if they had appreciated fully her focus on language. By foregrounding to participants the overall purpose of my research as exploring perspectives around feedback, I do feel, like Tuck (2013), that participants might not have appreciated that analytical focus was on their discourse and their construction of perspectives through their language, rather than only on a summary of their opinions around aspects of the feedback process. Hammersley (2014:538) seems to be suggesting that we should accept, even adopt, being "unethical" in this way, in confronting the "complex and situational character of ethical judgements", perpetuating his concern for the autonomy of the researcher and his contention that there are areas of ethics not covered by ethics committees (Hammersley, 2007:235). Similarly, Rossman and Rallis (2010:379-80) point out that each research decision has moral dimensions and highlight the limitations of review boards. My position is that, as I gave paramount importance to protecting anonymity, as discussed (4.7), and participants were fully aware that I recorded and transcribed their interviews, so possessing oral and written texts containing language choices for analysis, my approach was ethically acceptable.

## **4.9 Summary**

This chapter presented the aims of my investigation in relation to my research questions (4.2). I explained why I considered a broadly ethnographic orientation appropriate to these aims (4.3). I then outlined my intended methods and the relative importance attached to different sorts of data (4.4) and described the data collection



process (4.5). I explained my approaches to analysis of the different types of data collected within 'realist' and 'interpretivist' frameworks (4.6). I then reviewed ethical considerations (4.7) and reflected upon my position as an 'insider' researcher, including issues related to researcher positioning (4.8).

My next three chapters present my findings in relation to my three key perspectives in response to my three research questions (1.3; 4.2; *Appendix 1*), beginning with student perspectives around feedback practices on assessed writing.

# CHAPTER 5

## STUDENT PERSPECTIVES AROUND FEEDBACK PRACTICES

### 5.1 Introduction

This chapter describes and discusses my findings in relation to my first research question: *What are students' perspectives around feedback practices on assessed writing?*

The Bakhtinian heuristic set out in Chapter 3 is used as the overarching framework for structuring this chapter, within which both realist and interpretivist analysis of data are included (as explained in Chapter 4). A specific analytical tool is used with regard to academic writing (Ivanič, 2004). The chapter is based on analysis of 52 respondents to the student questionnaire (*Appendix 3.4*), which yielded mainly quantitative data, and on qualitative data from the nine student interviews. (See Chapter 4 for details.)

Analysis is supplemented by demographic information elicited by the University upon student registration (*Appendix 3.6*). Both quantitative and qualitative data are introduced across the chapter to explore the key research question.

The chapter begins by presenting brief profiles of the nine student interviewees (5.2) and is then structured around the key themes arising from the Bakhtinian-informed heuristic Table 3.1. These are: language and communication as dialogic (discussed in 5.3.1); authoritative voice and internally persuasive discourse (5.3.2); heteroglossia

(5.3.3.). This chapter concludes by summarising key points to emerge from both the realist and interpretivist lenses adopted in this thesis (5.4).

## 5.2 Student participants

In this section, I introduce the nine student interviewees, further to [Table 4.3](#) which summarised their biographical details. The profiles below draw on interview data, supplemented by questionnaire comments and centrally collected University demographic information (see *Appendix 3.6*), which I reference as 'UD'. I present interviewees' own priorities and histories regarding assessed/academic writing, together with their accounts of reasons for studying. Throughout the presentation of findings, all quotations originate from interviews, unless otherwise acknowledged. Full student interviewee profiles are also appended (*Appendix 3.7*).

Ben, Carl, Dawn, Julie, Martin and Rose were in their sixties, Tom in his fifties and Mary and Phil in their forties. Ben, Dawn and Phil emerged as the more confident writers with much prior experience. Carl, Dawn, Mary and Phil were in employment and Ben, Julie, Martin, Rose and Tom were retired. Ben, Dawn, Julie, Martin and Rose were studying mainly for personal development and Carl, Mary, Phil and Tom for both personal and career development. None of the interviewees declared on University registration that they were studying for a career alone. (See also [Table 4.3](#).)

Ben had been involved in writing for much of his working life, editing policy documents within a government department "to make [them] more accessible". Ben explained that as he had not been to university, he considered that studying "would be a good way of using time in retirement" and as he need not "study for professional qualifications", his

motivations were to “expand my education and to widen my knowledge of the English language”, his personal subject interest being “the history of English and its present role as a global *lingua franca*” (questionnaire). Ben, then, appeared to be focused on the process of academic study, rather than a goal, such as a grade/qualification. He explained that he was only taking a qualification “sort of on paper” and that he was in no hurry to continue: “I prefer to wait to see if there is a subject that really grabs me” because how he spent his time in retirement was important, as study takes “a chunk out of your life”.

Carl was employed as a Chef Manager. Carl had little experience of HE, leaving school at age 16 to take a catering qualification. The words that Carl used suggested that he found the academic process an ongoing battle; for example, he said that, passing one module had been “a bit of a struggle” and his tutor had helped him to “realise what I was tackling”.

Dawn was the only student interviewee still in employment who declared ‘personal development’ as her reason for study (UD). Dawn was working as a University teaching assistant, having retired recently from her main role as a University Language Co-ordinator; she had “stepped back” because she “got sick of administration”, so it seems evident that she was not studying for career advancement. However, Dawn explained that although she was taking the module “for fun” she still had “a certain pride in it” to do well. Dawn was the most experienced student interviewee academically, with a degree and two Masters (Education and Russian). Dawn’s discourse echoed her wide experience of HE and she reflected on the differences in tutor expectations between disciplines, considering that feedback is useful so that these requirements can be

grasped, because of the “amount of strategic planning that goes into writing” in terms of “what a particular tutor is looking for”.

Julie had retired from her role as I.T. services Project Manager and was studying for a degree in Modern Languages. Although the studied module was a compulsory component for her degree, it was Julie who insisted (without prompt) that: “I’m doing it for pleasure...not for gain”. She declared “interest in modern languages” as her study goal on the questionnaire. Even so, she appeared to measure her success by tutor-allocated grades. Julie explained that during the studied module, she “improved” in respect of academic work; I asked Julie how she measured this, whether in terms of feedback comments or grades; she confirmed “in terms of grades”. Julie considered that she “didn’t really have any experience” of academic writing before the studied module, as the French modules that she had taken previously

“are different, as you’ve got the more rigid organisation of essays...I didn’t really class that as academic writing”.

Martin had much previous experience of HE through his studies of Mechanical Engineering but said he had little experience of academic writing (as he perceived it). Martin was a retired Design Engineer. His narration of his educational journey to date appeared as an account of his negative encounters with the education system. He “failed his finals” and his “writing ability was not very good”. Martin, then, had technical qualifications but not a degree. He declared he was studying for personal development only (UD) and “mainly personal development” on the questionnaire. Martin’s discourse appeared to suggest his perception of learning as following a path, an ongoing process, such as when relating his experiences of academic writing:

“before I did *Worlds of English*<sup>9</sup>, I’d done a three-year German course...before that I studied at [name] Polytechnic...before that I was at the University of [name]”

until “eventually The Open University”, providing a narrative of his academic experience to date.

Mary had ‘A’ levels<sup>10</sup> and worked as a part-time tutor of English to Speakers of Other Languages. She explained within her interview that she studied both for interest and professional relevance; she had elaborated her reasons on the questionnaire:

“to gain a fuller understanding of how the English language is structured and used out of personal interest and for professional use”.

Mary declared herself not to be a native speaker of English. She said that her main experience of academic writing was with the OU, “producing work for the course...I mean I’ve got ‘A’ levels but I wouldn’t include that personally”.

Phil had a degree in Computer Studies and worked as an I.T. Consultant. This module was a compulsory part of Phil’s degree. Confidence in his academic writing pervaded Phil’s discourse, using construction/building metaphors to refer to his progress, of a “framework” involving learning “how to build an academic essay”, which he had “nailed the way” to do; he had “mastered the technique” and could now concentrate on “the conceptual side of things”, valuing the exchange of ideas with fellow students.

Rose had no prior academic qualifications beyond GCSE equivalents. She had retired from her role as an accounts office manager. A theme of Rose’s discourse was her

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<sup>9</sup> The module studied by this researched cohort.

<sup>10</sup> No further details of subject or number were provided or available (UD)

criticism of the studied module regarding its academic writing requirements which “should have been heavily underlined” within its prospectus (questionnaire). Rose commented:

“It soon became apparent that my ability to write academic essays was woefully below par. I may unfortunately have missed any reference to this requirement before I enrolled on the course.”

Tom had no prior formal qualifications above GCSE equivalent (UD). Although Tom was retired as a firefighter (questionnaire), he declared employment and personal development equally important reasons for studying (UD). His study goal was “to gain the requisite amount for my degree and to complement my music modules” (questionnaire). Key themes emerging throughout Tom’s interview were his constant concern to stay “on track” and his focus on what he referred to as the importance of (his own) clarity of message: “the biggest thing for me, making sure that the words I’m using...are the words I’m trying to say”. As Tom needed this module for his degree, I suggested (within interview) that tutor feedback would be most useful to him in relation to grading; Tom corrected me: “not just for the marks that you get but to make sure I’m understanding and getting the point”, although Tom saw tutor-allocated grades as confirming that he was on the “right track”.

The next section explores students’ experiences of and perspectives around feedback, drawing on the 52 student questionnaire responses, foregrounding the perspectives of the nine student interviewees and relating to the Bakhtinian framework set out in Chapter 3 and summarised in Table 3.1.

## 5.3 Exploring student perspectives around feedback practices using a Bakhtinian-informed heuristic

### 5.3.1 Language and communication as dialogic: To what extent is the interaction that exists around feedback practices dialogic (in Bakhtinian terms)?

As discussed (3.2), on one level all communication associated with feedback can be seen as part of a dialogic frame, as constantly interrelated to the words of another, including the formal written feedback as a response to students' assessed writing and any follow-up discussion, via email, telephone or face-to-face. This section explores what student-tutor interaction around feedback exists and to what extent this can be considered dialogic in relation to a Bakhtinian ideal, as continually engaging with another's word and involved in an ongoing struggle with an inherently powerful, authoritative voice.

Alternative categories to this Bakhtinian notion of dialogic that can be applied to types of interaction around feedback practices are, as discussed (3.3.2), 'monologic' and 'dialectic'. A monologic approach has been identified as one-way tutor-student communication that is non-negotiable and related to a 'deficit' model, as identified by Lillis and Turner (2001:65), for example. A second alternative to a dialogic relationship might be a dialectic one of a Vygotskian type, identified by Lillis (2003) and White (2014), as discussed in 3.2, whereby feedback centres on producing a synthesised meaning, in line with institutionally acceptable values. The emphasis on synthesis as a dialectic approach is construed by Bakhtin as fundamentally monologic (Lillis, 2003; see 3.2) and this understanding is adopted in this thesis. Of course, applying labels, such as



‘monologic’ and ‘dialogic’, to student perspectives of language and communication around feedback on assessed writing is not straightforward, as discussed below.

An initial look at the student questionnaire data, such as in [Figure 5.1](#), might suggest that the formal written tutor feedback on assessed writing plus summative grade (a practice described in 1.2.2) is perceived by students to be one-way, monologic; most students (71 per cent, questionnaire) report no student-tutor discussion following their receipt of written tutor feedback, one student declaring a preference not to discuss feedback with a tutor.

This monologism is apparent also in interview accounts. When asked specifically within interview, Mary considered feedback as “one-way...and fairly objective because it’s based on the work that has been submitted.” She seemed not to view feedback as part of an ongoing process or dialogue engaging with her and her views but based purely on her assessed writing. However, Mary did “think feedback is very important”, as seemed to be the case for most of the students, from questionnaires as well as interview responses.

Rose was the only student interviewee who appeared sceptical about the value of student-tutor interaction around feedback. She did not answer my questions about her few email exchanges following feedback, maintaining that, because tutors wanted to “make sure that they’ve done a good job”, feedback was concerned with:

“making sure you tick those boxes with your writing, as opposed to perhaps anything else so it [email exchanges] didn’t really make a strong impression on me.”

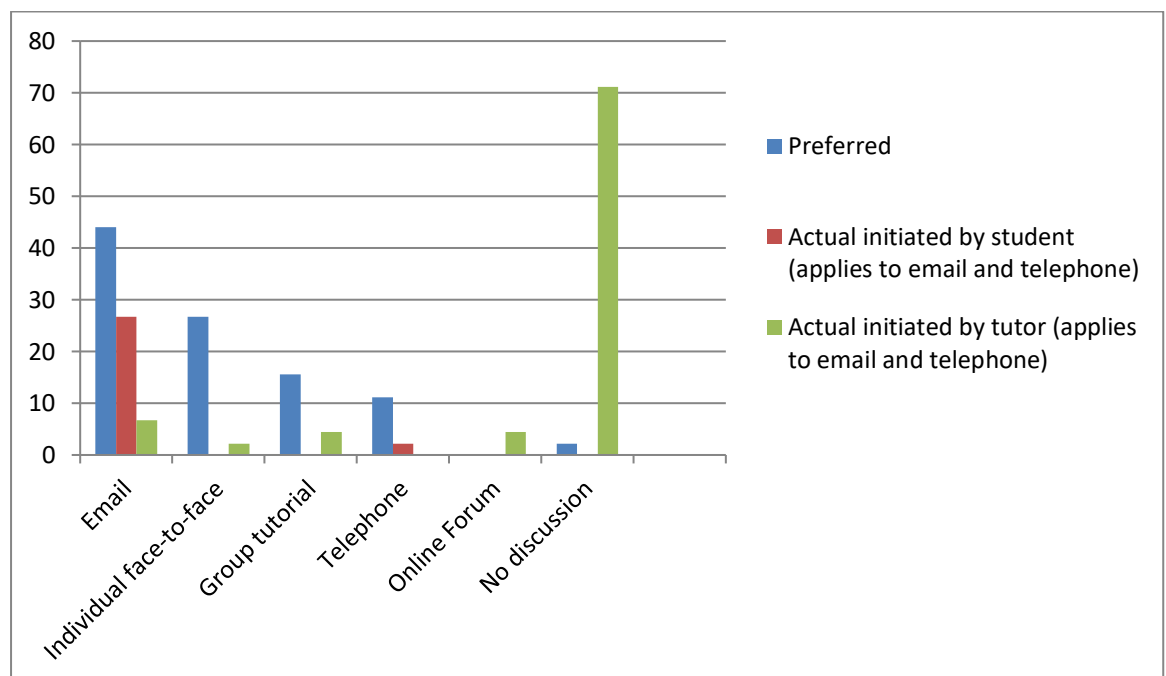
Rose here is referring to feedback on assessed/academic writing and not to its subject content, a differential revisited in the next section (5.3.2) and discussed further with regard to tutor perspectives in 6.3.1.

In order to explore the type of interaction around feedback discussions, the questionnaire asked for preferred and actual medium for any student-tutor interaction concerning feedback, beyond the formal written feedback provided (see [Figure 5.1](#)). I felt that this question was fundamental to finding out about perspectives on student-tutor interaction around feedback practices, particularly in this distance learning context (see 1.2.2), within which scheduled and practical opportunities for such are inevitably restricted. Student perspectives derived from these responses were then followed up within interviews.

Figure 5.1: Student questionnaire sample: preferred and actual medium for feedback discussion and its initiation

#### Questionnaire questions<sup>11</sup>:

- *Have you ever discussed assignment feedback with your tutor on this module?*  
(If “yes”, students were asked to categorise this discussion according to medium and in the case of telephone and email were asked to state who initiated, themselves or their tutor)
- *What would be your preferred method for any discussion of assignment feedback with your tutor?*



<sup>11</sup> See Appendix 3.4 for the full questionnaire and Appendix 7 for the analysis of closed questions.

Amongst questionnaire respondents who reported any discussion around feedback, the most preferred and used medium was email, with individual face-to-face communication in second place; discussion with a tutor at a group tutorial was also a favoured medium. Almost half of student participants responded that they had met their tutor at an optional tutorial or day school and another 37 per cent (17) of student questionnaire respondents commented that they wanted to attend (optional) face-to-face tutorials but were unable to do so<sup>12</sup>, with a few students preferring telephone discussion. The data also indicates ([Figure 5.1](#)) that most email and telephone discussion that did take place was initiated by students, suggesting their desire for communication with a tutor beyond the written formal feedback on their writing.

Interviewees also reported tending to initiate any discussion over feedback. They, too, valued email and face-to-face tutorial sessions. Ben, Julie and Tom favoured email (questionnaire and interview); Julie explained that this was, “because you can read it several times”, suggesting that Julie wanted to be sure of her tutor’s meaning. Julie (only) also valued telephone discussions. In contrast, Mary focused on what she was able to convey in her own communication and of the tutor’s understanding of this. She expressed the view that making a complicated point via email was “quite cumbersome” and added “you can communicate so much more when you are talking than when you are writing<sup>13</sup>”, when

“the tutor can’t take into consideration the personality and the nature of the student, possibly the difficulties they are having...tailor the feedback to that.”

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<sup>12</sup> This might have been for reasons of distance, lack of transport, childcare, work or other personal reasons.

<sup>13</sup> Writing being equated with email by Mary

Mary continued to comment on the distance learning context of study, where: “the tutor and the student aren’t well-known to each other at all” and so feedback seems

“more objective in the sense that they are just giving feedback on the work...Whereas a tutor who teaches in class is probably able to factor in a lot of other aspects as well”.

The other student interviewees, too, preferred face-to-face communication, although Dawn favoured group discussion with a tutor within a tutorial, rather than individual contact with her tutor<sup>14</sup>. For Martin, face-to-face communication was valued, seemingly because body language “is as much an important part of communicating as talking”, again, suggesting the importance of the effectiveness of communication in relation to mutual understanding of intended meaning for both participants within an interaction.

Interestingly, then, the brief reasons provided for the preferred medium for feedback discussion concern the quality of interaction, in terms of expressing and understanding intended meaning, rather than time or convenience. This can be related to the recognition in empirical research of a requirement to clarify what is valued in assessment (Adcroft and Willis, 2013). Such an apparent student concern with clarity of institutionally-valued expectations might both relate to a monologic perspective of tutor feedback on assessed writing and of student-tutor interaction around feedback and to a Vygotskian dialectic approach to meaning making, a “quest for one-ness” as described by White (2014:222) and discussed in 3.3.2. This, concern for clarity of valued expectation seems evident in the desire for more detailed feedback and model answers in questionnaire responses, when respondents were asked for examples of

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<sup>14</sup> However, Dawn herself had been unable to attend the group tutorials provided.

'helpful'/'unhelpful' feedback (see [Tables 5.1](#) and [5.2](#)), one student wanting to know "exactly where and why [an assignment] fell short of top marks" (questionnaire comment), although only one respondent complained about not understanding feedback comments.

However, this search for more detailed comment might also be interpreted as an exchange of ideas with a tutor as expert or "more competent other" (Steen-Utheim and Wittek, 2007:26 and see 3.2), within an ongoing, dialogic relationship.

**Table 5.1: Student questionnaire: 'helpful' feedback**

**Questionnaire question:** *What has been the most helpful example of feedback or advice received?*<sup>15</sup>

(Student quotations are in italics; normal font indicates the researcher's summary comments.)

<b><u>Percentage/(number) of respondents</u></b>	<b><u>Type of guidance mentioned + sample student comment</u></b>
<b>17% (9)</b>	Advice on approach to tackling the assignment and regarding structuring/planning:  <i>Read everything before putting pen to paper.</i>
<b>10% (5)</b>	Advice on presenting an argument and academic writing style
<b>6% (3)</b>	How to achieve a high grade in next assignment:  <i>exactly where and why [an assignment] fell short of top marks</i>
<b>6% (3)</b>	Praise and positive encouragement:  <i>The most helpful remarks have been encouragement</i>
<b>6% (3)</b>	Clarifying what the question is asking
<b>6% (3)</b>	About referencing
<b>2% (1)</b>	On subject content

<sup>15</sup> Student participants were requested to refer to the specific module studied and also were asked whether the feedback advice was from their tutor or from another source. All sources cited here originate from the tutor. (See *Appendix 7* for the full analysis of questionnaire closed questions.)

**Table 5.2: Student questionnaire: ‘unhelpful’ feedback**

**Questionnaire question<sup>16</sup>:** *Can you provide an example of one piece of advice from your tutor that you do not feel was helpful to you?*

(Student quotations are in italics; normal font indicates the researcher’s summary comments.)

<b><u>Percentage/(number) of comments</u></b>	<b><u>Type of guidance</u></b>
<b>19% (10)</b>	Students answered the question by <i>praising</i> tutors rather than providing ‘unhelpful’ examples, as requested
<b>14% (7)</b>	Not enough detail within feedback:  <i>I am constantly told my writing is too descriptive, but I am not told how to correct this.</i>
<b>8% (4)</b>	Unfair/unjust criticism:  <i>Constant hammering about the way I write because I don’t follow her format.</i>
<b>6% (3)</b>	Discrepancies with other tutors’ feedback:  <i>Advice on referencing varies from tutor to tutor.</i>
<b>4% (2)</b>	No examples/models provided
<b>4% (2)</b>	Advice about module structure, not feedback comments
<b>2% (1)</b>	Not helping with next assessment
<b>2% (1)</b>	Superfluous comments
<b>2% (1)</b>	Did not understand comments

<sup>16</sup> See *Appendix 7* for the full questionnaire analysis of closed questions.



Ben and Martin wanted advice to enhance the effectiveness of their own communication through writing, to sharpen their own meaning-making and clarity of message. Ben's valuing of this skill stemmed from his role in a government department,

“editing people's rather difficult-to-read work and to try to make it accessible for general readers”.

Particular advice from a tutor that Ben categorises as “good” was to help him to “get round to the core point”, avoiding “waffle”. Martin's theme of the importance of effective communication pervaded his interview:

“getting over your knowledge to somebody else in a way that shows you've understood the subject”.

Here Martin seems to be signalling an acknowledgement of knowledge from an authoritative source reinterpreted (Bakhtin[1934-35],1981:339) or appropriated (page 342) and when re-told in Martin's written text may become part of what Bakhtin terms “a double-voiced narration” (page 342 and see 3.3.3). This attempt at appropriation appears evident in interviewees' reasons for not contacting tutors further to formal feedback. Carl preferred to “fathom out” the meaning of tutor feedback himself:

“You do learn after a while to sort of scramble out...if you go back to the study material and you go back to the comment and you think again and think again, it does eventually come.”

Carl seemed to perceive his tutor as expert, a ‘competent other’ (see above and 3.2) and to consider it his responsibility to engage with his tutor's expertise: “my

marks improved progressively through going through the course with him [his tutor]”.

Julie considered the formal written tutor feedback as dialogue, that is as two-way interaction, and when asked specifically whether this was the case (interviewer: *Did you see that as a dialogue or did you see it as a kind of one-way statement?*) Julie replied, “yes”; she explained that this was because the tutor “seemed to be able to refer back to the previous piece of marked work”, indicating, perhaps, ongoing dialogue around texts but still with an authoritative focus. Whilst the tutor feedback that Julie cited appears to echo a ‘deficit’ approach (see 3.2), with her writing “all crossed out and there were big comments, ‘You can’t do that’”, she laughed as she recalled this and added, “It’s quite exciting to get the marked assignment.” She saw tutor feedback as “superimposed” on and not negating her own work. Julie described the “crossed out” feedback as

“really useful. You got there what your intent was and they supervised how it could be honed better and I thought it was great.”

Julie, then, appeared to view her tutor’s seemingly monologic feedback, such as prescribing what she could not do, as part of a more dialogic relationship. Julie wanted to be “encouraged to answer the question in my own way” as there is “no right way of doing it”. Julie liked that it was “acceptable” for her to outline and justify her own approach to an assignment question.

Phil felt there was no need to contact the tutor because of the availability of (optional) group tutorials, which Phil valued as an opportunity “where you could discuss the particular problem” both with the tutor and other students. (Phil referred mainly to subject content here.)

Other student interviewee comments do seem to suggest a more straightforwardly monologic perspective of tutor feedback. Tom did contact his tutor but only when he felt it necessary to clarify instructions: “what they’re asking me” which he sometimes found difficult to understand. Tom explained:

“It’s always the assignment that gives you feedback. I don’t really get an awful lot of feedback from tutors inbetween times, unless I initiate it, unless I contact them with a problem...if there’s something I’m really stuck with.”

Dawn also valued feedback that showed “what was expected” through the provision of examples.

Mary emphasised the importance of feedback to her: “I think feedback is very important for the learner and the more detailed the better”, perhaps indicating a view of the tutor as expert authoritative voice and so echoing some questionnaire responses ([Table 5.1](#)), where it is indicated that detailed tutor feedback (on structuring, presentation of an argument and expected academic writing style, for example) are important for students.

### 5.3.2 Authoritative voice and internally persuasive discourse: *To what extent are particular voices perceived as authoritative and what evidence is there of the development of internally persuasive discourse?*

In 3.3.3, I explained the Bakhtinian concept of an authoritative voice as one which is non-negotiable and takes no account of variation, with inherent and unchallenged power. The opposing force, an ‘internally persuasive’ counterpart (Bakhtin,[1934-

35],1981:270-2; 342; 345) is one associated with independence of thought and reappropriation and ownership of discourse (see 3.2). In this section, I explore what are perceived by student participants to function as authoritative voices within the feedback process and what evidence there is of a challenge, an internally persuasive discourse which involves appropriating the authoritative voice and reinterpreting it, one that can be associated with a concept of agency, as identified by Mraović (2008:292) as “another who can talk back” (and see 3.3.3).

Potential authoritative voices identified in relation to students (in [Figure 1.1](#) and see 1.2.2) are the summative grade, tutors and more indirectly the institution, as represented primarily by central academics and also by official documentation.

The tutor-allocated summative grade can be seen as an authoritative, non-negotiable voice. Interviewees suggested that they measured their academic progress via summative grading, including those studying mainly for personal development (5.2); grades were an indication of the level of their academic success. No comments were made in relation to arguing with a grading decision (in questionnaires or interviews), only regarding requests for an explanation. Tutor feedback comments are reported as read (in response to the specific questionnaire question [[Appendix 4.5](#)]) and as valued, with little criticism indicated (see [Tables 5.1](#) and [5.2](#)).

Carl, Martin, Mary, Phil and Tom, in particular, appeared to measure their progress via summative grades. Carl, for example, focusing on his marks, singled out a particular tutor for praise who had helped him with signposting, paragraphing and referencing, so “my marks improved progressively through going through this course with him”; Carl qualified his perspective on this tutor as authoritative voice in his approach to feedback and assessment:

“I wouldn’t say he was prescriptive but, you know, he was sort of very clear how he wanted TMAs<sup>17</sup> to be produced”.

Martin, relating his engagement with feedback in general, told of his discovery that:

“Your opinion has got to be an opinion based on the knowledge that you gained through the course.”

When Martin realised this, it was “like somebody turning the light on”, explaining that his grades went from the sixties<sup>18</sup> to the nineties<sup>19</sup>, and thus suggesting his association of grading with an authoritative judge of academic progress.

Mary, too, seemed to measure her progress by tutor-allocated grades. While seeing such grades as non-negotiable from an authoritative voice, she nevertheless emailed her tutor for advice when her grades were lower than she expected. Mary appeared to want more specific and authoritative feedback, her questionnaire responses indicating that she preferred this to be detailed, specific and criterion-graded:

“I would have liked the written comments to be much longer and more detailed. I would have liked the feedback form to include percentages for all the assessment criteria, not just an overall percentage.”

Phil, too, seemed to view grading as an authoritative voice, suggesting that for him grades were an indication of success. Phil’s early academic study had been within the field of technology and so when he perceived he needed to learn a different style of academic writing, he took a course which gave him the “general tools you could use with

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<sup>17</sup> Tutor Marked Assignments

<sup>18</sup> Equivalent to a 2:2 in terms of a degree result

<sup>19</sup> Equivalent to a high first class pass/distinction in terms of a degree result

academic writing for anything". He then found within future feedback that his grades improved "my lowest grade I would usually get would be a lot higher than it had been before".

Tom, in reflecting on both his own progress and tutor feedback, indicated he measured his success by tutor-allocated grades. Discussing his tendency of "getting off track", Tom explained:

"The tutor says, 'You've done well. This is what we are looking for.' Then obviously that results in a higher mark and that means that I know that I'm on the right track with it. I'm understanding where they're at."

In one respect, then, grades themselves do appear as an authoritative voice, stemming from both institutional and tutor authority. Yet, in the way these are appropriated as a measurement of progress, they might also be seen as students taking control and ownership of their own learning and as such part of a dialogic relationship around feedback practices, for example, in the way that Phil took a course to acquire "general tools" for academic writing to apply to "anything" and then measured his own progress by his grades, which became "a lot higher" than previously. The grade appears as a measure of progress along a journey throughout which the student has agency.

Nevertheless, tutors can be seen as an authoritative voice through their unquestioned role in allocating summative grades. In further considering student perspectives of tutors' roles in the feedback process, attitudes towards tutor feedback generally were explored. In relation to students' perception of tutors as authoritative voices, the extent to which tutor feedback is valued is important to consider, beginning with the amount of attention that students pay to tutor feedback on their assessed writing.

A fundamental concern of the literature (for example, Pitt and Norton, 2017) and anecdotally amongst colleagues is whether tutor feedback comments are read. All questionnaire respondents stated that they read tutor feedback thoroughly on the covering feedback summary form and only one reported not reading script comments on their assessed writing. All student interviewees claimed to read both. The evidence, therefore, suggests that students do engage with tutor feedback.

The extent to which tutor feedback is valued is evidenced by the responses to the 'helpful'/'unhelpful' feedback questionnaire questions, as shown in [Tables 5.1](#) and [5.2](#) are discussed below. These findings provide insight into both student expectations and their perceived academic needs and so help to highlight a range of perspectives surrounding tutor feedback.

What does emerge, generally, is the amount of student satisfaction with tutor feedback; it is noteworthy that praise replaced criticism for most of the responses to the 'unhelpful' question ([Table 5.2](#)), students substituting positive comments about tutor feedback instead of the requested 'unhelpful' example. Feedback comments perceived as most 'helpful' are those advising on aspects of academic assignment construction and writing which feed forward in relation to achieving "a high grade in the next assignment" (questionnaire: [Table 5.1](#)).

Most criticism (from 14 per cent of respondents; see [Table 5.2](#)) concerns insufficiently detailed feedback, one student, commenting:

"I am constantly told my writing is too descriptive but I am not told how to correct this" (questionnaire).

Further criticism is minimal; eight per cent cite unjust/unfair feedback, with one accompanying comment which suggests opposition to tutor authority, complaining of:

“constant hammering about the way I write because I don’t follow her [the tutor’s] format”.

There is also criticism of discrepancies around referencing (four per cent), lack of examples/models (four per cent), and one per cent (one comment) for each of lack of help with future assessment, superfluous feedback and not understanding tutor feedback comments. It seems, then, that tutor feedback is largely valued as expert advice, with relatively little criticism and that most of the criticism in evidence comprises the desire for more detailed feedback comments. Therefore, it appears that there is a blurred division between the concepts of a tutor providing ‘expert advice’ in a role as ‘competent other’ (see above and 3.2) with whom there can be dialogic, ongoing interaction and with an idea of the tutor as a representative of authority, an authoritative voice. Nevertheless, the inherent authority of the summative grade, fixed and unarguable, seems to restrict potential student agency. (A Bakhtinian concept of agency was discussed in relation to an internally persuasive discourse in 3.3.3, citing Mraović [2008:292].) A more in-depth exploration of interview comments helps to ascertain to what extent voices are perceived as authoritative and the nature of any agency in relation to authority.

Evaluative comments from student interviewees, in particular, can be considered as suggesting agency in the face of an authoritative voice. Whilst Ben is complimentary about “useful” tutor comments and a tutor who “did a good job...was very knowledgeable and could be quite entertaining”, he is also evaluative of his study experience, critical of a tutorial for “information overload”, for instance, and of tutor



feedback which included: “It’s quite wrong to start a sentence with ‘And’ or ‘But’”; Ben commented that this tutor had: “a very old-fashioned approach to English speaking<sup>20</sup>”.

Carl’s description of his learning journey appeared to signal acceptance of his own agency and responsibility in engaging with expert advice within feedback, even when this was not immediately understandable to him. He assured me:

“I’ve never felt...what they [tutors] have said has been sort of unreasonable, you know, or incorrect”.

Dawn’s perception of her own agency was particularly apparent. Her concept of studying for “fun” comprised being left to work out for herself how to proceed: “to see a way into the answer is the interesting part” and that “part of the game is that you actually try and do what the tutor wants you to do”. Dawn’s learning for “fun” and her view of following tutor expectations as a “game” seems both an example of Bakhtin’s ([1934-35], 1981:295-7 and see 3.3.2) suggestion that engagement with an authoritative voice is a conscious choice and with the concept that the authoritative voice can remain so only as long as it is perceived as such. Whilst Dawn appeared appreciative of her tutor’s role, she was still evaluative, making judgements regarding tutor competence:

“that particular tutor was incredibly coherent and the combination of what she wrote on essays and what she said in tutorials was spot on”.

Dawn appeared, then, to value clear, detailed feedback on her finished product, rather than guidance beforehand, preferring to be “encouraged to answer the question in my

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<sup>20</sup> Note that Ben refers here to a range of recently studied modules within the OU and not only to the researched presentation.

own way”, not “being told that I have to answer on this particular area”, a repeated theme throughout her interview. Dawn concluded: “It has to be me.”

Julie’s evaluative comments were both positive and accepting, praising her tutor’s “care”, explaining: “she [Julie’s tutor] obviously did take a pride in what she was doing; she was good”. Julie referred to what could be considered the encoded authority within module guides on referencing requirements as “bizarre” but that “it was the way it had to be done”. (By ‘encoded authority’ I mean an authoritative and usually anonymous institutional voice appearing in documentation instructing, advising and warning of penalties, for example, as explained in 4.6.4 and explored further in 7.3.2).

Whilst Rose was positive about her individual tutor, who had “given me help and encouragement way beyond the call of duty” (questionnaire), she was directly critical of the University, commenting: that the text books contained “some very obscure wording” and were “too heavy going” within a context where “students will not have any previous qualifications<sup>21</sup>”.

Tom’s “track” metaphor (a concern with staying “on track” being a key theme of his interview [5.2.]), might suggest that he saw the tutor’s role as one of expert guidance and an authoritative voice. Yet, Tom explained that he had not been taught academic writing explicitly, which he had “sort of picked up as you go along” and Tom appeared to prioritise his own responsibility and agency in this process: “it’s down to you to pick out what they’re looking for”. Tom explained that several tutors had advised him to focus more and added: “If more than one tutor says it then obviously it means it’s more of a problem.” He told me he did not always agree with tutors on points of academic

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<sup>21</sup> This is not necessarily, and often not, true, although prior academic qualifications are not required for enrolment on this module.

argument: “That’s my opinion on something and he [the tutor] holds a slightly different one.” Tom clarified that such disagreement usually concerned subject content, rather than academic writing.

Indeed, most evaluative comments about tutor feedback, both in interviews and questionnaires ([Tables 5.1](#) and [5.2](#)), and most reports of seeking additional advice from tutors, relate to aspects of academic writing, rather than to subject content, such as Carl’s comments (above) about advice regarding signposting, paragraphing and referencing and as discussed in 5.3.1 with reference to Rose. Only one questionnaire respondent mentioned subject content in relation to ‘helpful’ tutor feedback ([Table 5.1](#)).

This exploration of the extent to which students perceive tutors’ voices as authoritative suggests that a tutor’s role can be viewed more accurately as expert other, rather than a straightforward authority, or using Bakhtin’s term, authoritative voice. There is ongoing evaluation of tutors’ roles, which is mainly positive with some criticism. Tutor authority seems to be respected rather than unthinkingly obeyed and there is evidence of internally persuasive discourse associated with independence of thought (Bakhtin [1934-35], 1981:345 and see 3.3.3).

Turning to students’ perspectives of the institution as an authoritative voice, as mediated by central academics and official documentation, evidence was minimal. Rose’s criticism of module textbooks and Julie’s reference to module guides seem to be the only acknowledgement of the institution as an authoritative voice within the interviews, in that these texts stem from the institution and institutional encoded authority (explained above) might be perceived within them.

The next section explores a range of potentially influential voices on student perspectives around feedback on their assessed writing.

### 5.3.3. Heteroglossia: Are there a range of voices that influence participants' perspectives around feedback practices?

As explained in 3.3.4, Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia as an inseparable mix of multiple voices in any utterance (Bakhtin,[1934-35],1981:291) is operationalised here as a range of influential voices which can be seen as juxtaposed (page 292). The Bakhtinian concept of heteroglossia is, then, related to the range of voices beyond the immediate feedback context that potentially influence participants in the feedback process. Such voices in this thesis are understood to be traces of discourses from concurrent or past experiences, persons or ideas which influence students' perspectives on feedback in different ways (and see 1.2.1 and 3.3.4). Included also within this exploration is any recognition by student interviewees of influential voices on members of other participant groups in this study context, tutors and central academics.

Potential influential voices on students' perspectives around feedback practices on their assessed writing explored were: voices relating to reasons for study; voices from other persons beyond the University context; voices from other life experiences, such as education and employment; voices from fellow students; voices associated with social media. I also consider any recognition by students of influential voices on members of other participant groups, tutors and central academics. I conclude this discussion with a separate sub-section (5.3.3.1) considering voices relating to students' underpinning beliefs about academic writing.

Reasons for study, as expressed by students, as discussed (1.2.1), were expected to be important influential voices on perspectives around feedback practices from my prior tutoring experience, which suggested that reasons for study were not necessarily focused on summative grade, as seems assumed in empirical research reviewed (2.5), with some exceptions, such as Scott, 2014. Both information from University registration and findings from the questionnaire data suggest that study for other reasons than a qualification motivated a large proportion of student participants.

The University's demographic data (UD) (*Appendix 3.6*) divides declared reasons for study upon student registration into four categories:

- Employment/career and personal development equally important
- Mainly personal development
- Mainly employment/career
- No response.

Only 21 per cent of questionnaire respondents stated on registration that they were studying mainly for employment/career, whilst 75 per cent of students cited 'personal development' as either part of or their only reason for study on University registration (*Figure 5.2*): "to keep my brain alive so as not to be a burden on society" (questionnaire respondent). The questionnaire continued to explore reasons for study in more detail and responses revealed that learning about subject content was at least part of the study motivation for almost half of the respondents (*Figure 5.3*):

"Also I am particularly interested in the English language in general, as I love words" (questionnaire respondent).

Module subject content was the only reason for study cited by 21 per cent, for example:

“[my] main goal is to...understand the roots and the evolution of the English language” (questionnaire respondent).

Figure 5.2

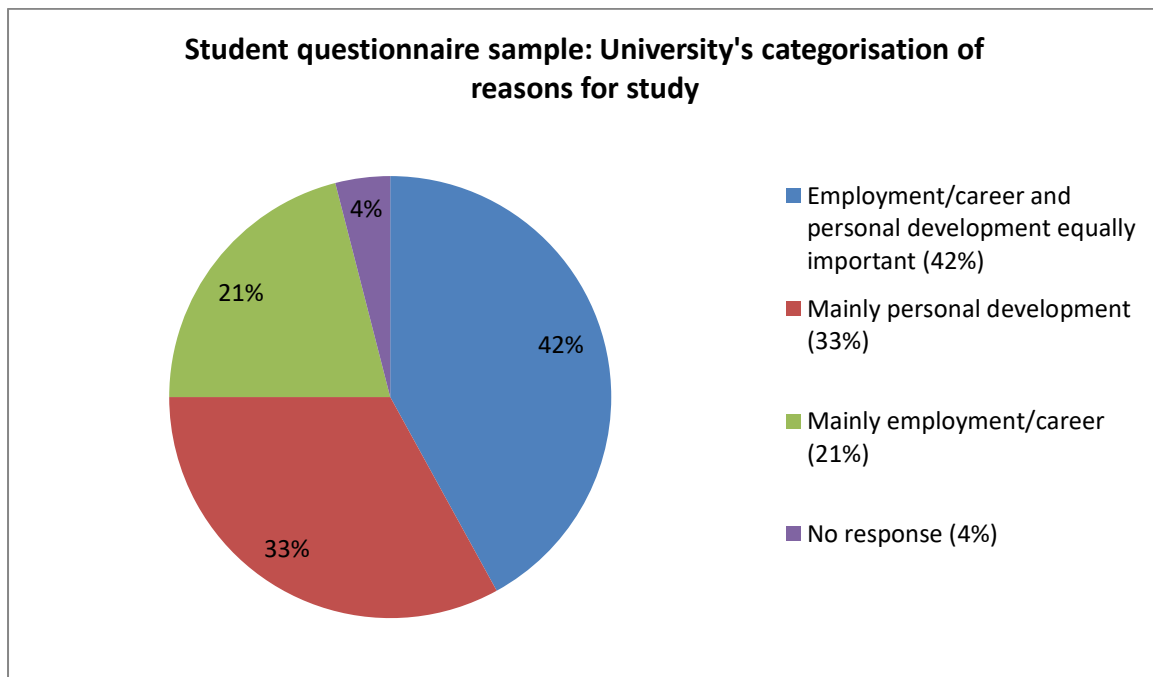
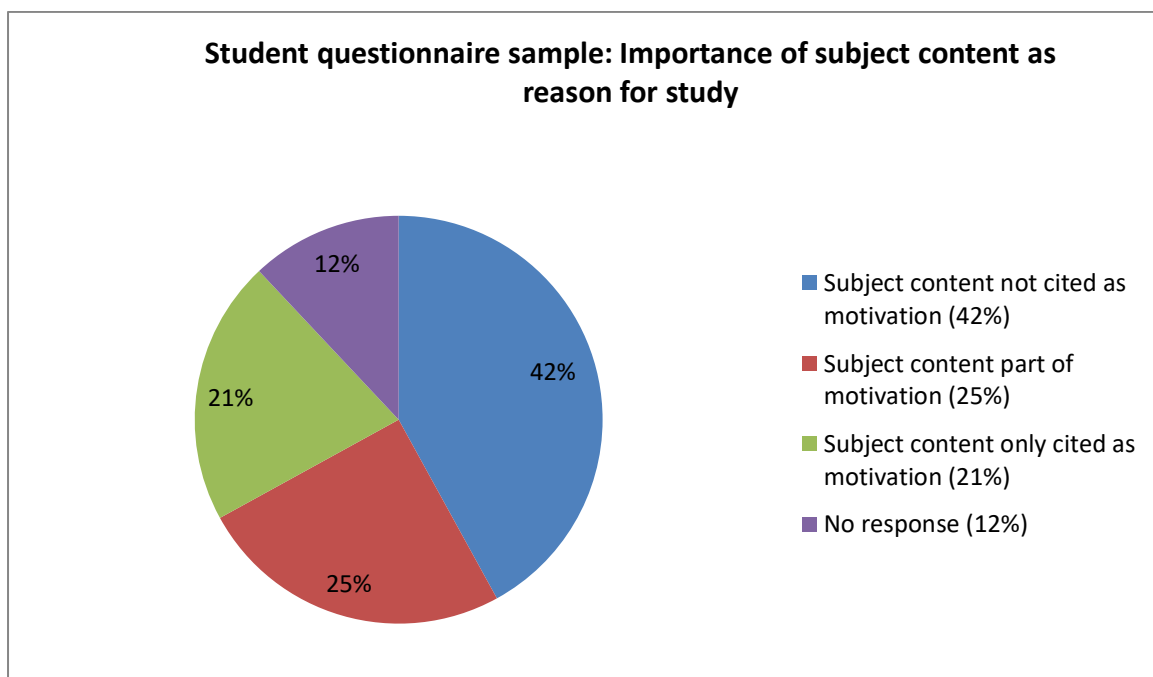


Figure 5.3



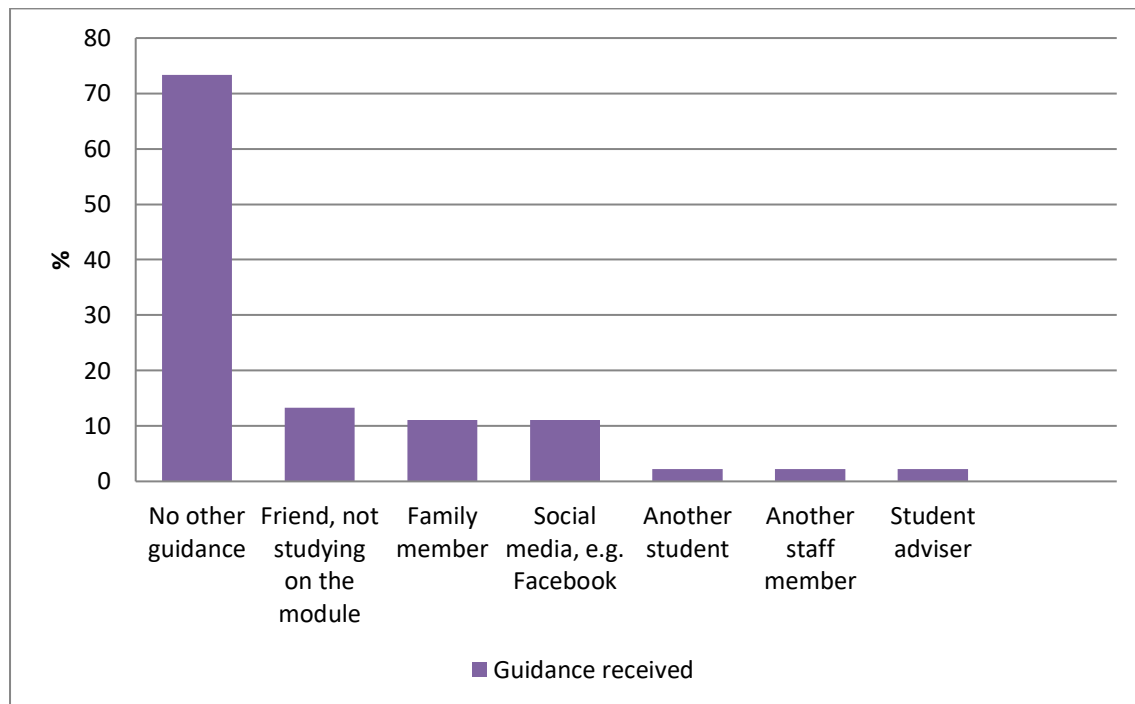
According to their comments in questionnaires, interviews and the University demographic data (UD), Ben, Dawn, Martin and Rose were studying mainly for personal development and Mary, Phil and Tom for both career and personal purposes, as explained in student profiles (5.2; *Appendix 3.7*). These profiles suggest that concern with their academic development, rather than a qualification as a goal, emerges for those studying for mainly personal development but that these students take “pride” (Dawn), to do well and measure achievement by summative grade, as discussed above (5.3.2).

A number of different voices are therefore evident in students’ accounts of reasons for study, including a concern for their academic development and to pursue subject content, besides ‘employment/career development’, indicated on University registration (*Figure 5.2*).

Reasons for study, then, do appear to be important influencing voices in exploring student perspectives on feedback around their assessed writing. Voices from other persons from outside the University context, influencing students’ perspectives around feedback on their assessed writing, were not particularly evident within questionnaire data, as *Figure 5.4* indicates. Most students acknowledged no external guidance and allusions to friends, family members and other University staff were minimal; the 11 per cent of students who mentioned social media was lower than suggested would be the case according to the concerns raised anecdotally and as discussed in 4.4.3.



Figure 5.4: Student questionnaire sample: guidance received other than from a tutor



Interview data revealed more about potential influencing voices on assessed writing from others besides and alongside the influence of tutor feedback. Explored below are potentially influencing voices derived from past experiences of education and employment, other persons, both from outside and within the studied context, and social media.

Voices potentially influencing current study emerged as relating to past employment from Ben and as prior education from other student interviewees. Ben referred to his role as editor in a government department: “A lot of my work in the past has involved writing.” Whilst Dawn, although a University teaching assistant and ex-University Language Coordinator with two MAs, declared herself not “an academic”, she clarified:

“I’m fairly confident I know how to write. I mean I’ve done quite a lot of writing...it’s not something I’m unsure of.”

Julie perceived neither her previous academic achievements in French and Mathematics as preparing for academic writing nor her “life before that”, when she “did a lot of technical documents”. Only Martin referred to the relevance of his (apparently negative) experience of prior formal education (5.2): “I failed my finals at [place] University because the course was not practical enough for my needs”. For past academic ‘failures’, Martin appeared to blame himself, “I let myself down”, explaining (as discussed in 4.6.3) that this was “an age-related thing” and that “manual work was deemed...maybe more important” in his “typical working-class background”.

Age seemed a theme of Martin’s discourse, which he related to wanting to include his personal viewpoint in his assessed writing, for instance:

“I’m a father and grandfather. And dads know best. Therefore, a father tends to be opinionated (*laughs*).”

Martin added:

“as you get older, I think you tend to say: ‘Well, OK, I can give an opinion based on my life experiences’”.

Martin’s accounts of these life experiences, of study, work and extended family, were prominent in his discourse.

Allusions to influential voices on assessed writing from other persons outside the University context were minimal. Ben reported communication with his family about his study for personal organisational reasons, to tell them: “I’m going to be busy.”

Martin referred to talking about module content with his wife as she was interested in language; he also cited one instance of chatting with a friend of forty years: “an English graduate from Cambridge...I borrowed a book from him.” Julie confirmed her questionnaire response within interview that there was no other source of influence on her academic writing, other than her tutor “because that’s what the tutor did certainly”.

Mary said she had mentioned course contents to a family member,

“just because they are interested in language as well but not in the sense that I would expect much of a contribution”.

Voices from fellow students seemed limited also. Only Phil showed he valued communication with other students pedagogically, particularly within face-to-face tutorials, where students “exchanged ideas”. He confirmed this would be “more on the conceptual side of things” and explained,

“when you’re discussing like the questions or particular ideas that we need to understand, then discussing them helps formulate them in your head”

and at a face-to-face tutorial you could

“hear other people talking about problems they’d had and you could learn from them as well...there was...a sharing of weak points...because what some people might have got wrong would have brought up things that you hadn’t thought about...someone else would bring up a particular way of doing something that would switch a lightbulb on”.

Phil’s attitude towards student-student interaction seemed to fit with his vision of “constant learning”:

“it’s always nice to pick up new things...as well as what you’re meant to be discussing.”

Phil suggested that students should feel obligated to attend face-to-face tutorials: “you ought to take advantage...because you share a learning experience”. Perhaps Phil’s interest in engaging in discussions around subject content with fellow students stems from his confidence in academic writing, which he had “nailed” (see 5.2), in contrast to other students who reported seeking tutor-specific guidance on aspects of academic writing.

Ben and Martin expressed dissatisfaction with opportunities for student-student contact and implied that they would have preferred discussions with fellow students but that these did not happen. Ben found low (optional) tutorial attendance “disappointing”, commenting: “I think that I would have learned more if they had been

a sort of livelier audience” and that tutorials “felt a bit flat”. Martin missed not having frequent tutorials but then when he did attend, he felt an “outsider”:

“eventually it got a bit too mundane for me because they weren’t talking about things to do with the course but about generalities, things I wasn’t interested in”.

When face-to-face group tutorials were appreciated, this seemed to be for the tutor’s contributions, rather than fellow student interaction, with the exception of Phil’s approach, described above. Rose declared about tutorials that it was not “worth going after a while”. When asked what she would have preferred, Rose explained that she would have liked time alone with her tutor, perhaps just ten minutes. Despite being more positive about group tutorials than Rose, it seemed that what Julie and Dawn most valued was also the scheduled interaction with their tutors, rather than with fellow students. Julie specified that this was the case and Dawn, too, explained her reason for preferring face-to-face tutorials was for tutor contact, responding negatively when asked whether she discussed assessed writing with fellow students; she would join in with general discussion but commented, “I’m not terribly vociferous”. Mary, like Rose, stated she would have preferred individual face-to-face contact with her tutor and clarified: “I don’t have any contact with other students at all” and that at tutorials, “I don’t even stop to speak to anybody.” Tom also explained that he attended tutorials for tutor advice. Likewise, whilst Carl preferred face-to-face tutorials, the interaction he valued was with his tutor. However, Carl was perhaps a little more prepared to appreciate the value of student-student influences around feedback than were Mary, Rose and Tom; he wanted to see models of other students’ ‘high-achieving’ writing in relation to structure and style, to answer his questions: “What did I miss?” and ‘How

else could I have done it?” Moreover, Carl was positive about use of the online module forum<sup>22</sup>, offering contact with other students within a tutorial group: “I’ve picked up a lot of useful points there.”

Evidence of the influence of voices mediated by social media on feedback on assessed writing was even less significant than was the case with questionnaire responses (Figure 5.4). Only Carl referred to Facebook usage, although not in relation to a study context, explaining: “I think generally that men are very cautious and I’m very cautious about Facebook.” Phil did not respond regarding social media but just replied that he had not used the module’s online forum. No use of social media was acknowledged by other interviewees. Ben explained: “I’m sort of a bit of an older generation...I haven’t sort of plugged into that”. Dawn, Martin and Rose simply denied using Facebook: “No, never” (Dawn); “No, no (*laugh*)” (Mary); “Not at all” (Rose). Julie did not respond to my specific related question but instead reaffirmed the importance of the tutor for her.

Regarding recognition by students of voices influencing members of the other two participant groups, tutors and central academics, several key points arise.

Ben, Carl, Martin and Mary referred briefly to possible influencing voices on tutors’ feedback practices. Ben, having criticised a tutor for being “pedantic”, remarked: “maybe she was taught English by an old-fashioned teacher”. Carl explained that his tutor had been an OU student himself and so was tutoring from his own experience: “He said that’s basically how he found it”. Martin commented on his tutor’s attempt at online tuition: “my tutor wasn’t very successful, actually, because he hadn’t got any experience of it”. Mary described empathy with her tutor, because of her own teaching

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<sup>22</sup> An online academic forum exists for each tutor group to discuss module-related issues, moderated by the group’s tutor.

background, although adding, “I’m not on the same level”. Mary was aware of pressure on tutor time:

“I think my tutor had quite a large number of students. I know he teaches on two courses, so that obviously involves quite a lot of students and quite a lot of feedback to write and so I am assuming that a lot of people will probably take advantage of ‘phoning him or emailing him so...I can understand why comments tend to be briefer than I’d like them to be”.

In relation to students’ acknowledgement of influential voices on central academics, Dawn was the only student interviewee in this category who alluded directly to a higher tier in the feedback process, considering that

“The Open University gives fairly clear instructions about what’s got to be done...but I’m not sure how tutors interpret that”.

This recognition might be due to Dawn’s University roles as Teaching Assistant/Language Coordinator (5.2). Rose’s comments, that tutors were only ticking boxes when providing feedback (5.3.1), might also indicate a perception of a ‘higher’ authority.

Overall, therefore, there was little acknowledgement by students of influential voices on members of the other two participant groups, tutors and central academics.

### 5.3.3.1 Voices influencing perspectives on academic writing (Ivanič, 2004)

It was also expected that underpinning approaches towards academic writing (writing in an academic context) would be an influential voice in student perspectives around tutor feedback (1.2.3) and so the perceived nature of academic writing and associated valued expectations were elicited. The ‘academic writing’ question asked to all participants in this study was:

*I wonder what you understand by ‘academic writing’? - What does this mean to you?*

The rationale for asking this question to all participants has been discussed (4.4.3) and student interviewee responses are appended in full (*Appendix 12.3*).

Two different overall student approaches towards academic writing could be distinguished: one as separate, apart from the students’ own writing identity, another as embedded, connected with the students’ sense of identity. Ben’s definition as “books written by others” seems to indicate the former. Julie, too, appeared to distance herself, in explaining that academic writing was:

“not really to do with my opinion of things. It’s to do with gathering evidence from various writers in the field”.

Perhaps, also, Dawn’s definition as “writing in a form that’s technically publishable” necessarily sets it apart from her own personal assessed work. Phil’s definition that academic writing is “anything to do with college, universities” seems more inclusive in terms of his study context and Martin and Rose appeared to adopt a more personal, involved standpoint, Martin explaining:



“I have to demonstrate with my writing that I have understood and that I can disseminate facts as well as give some demonstration...some interpretation of the facts to illustrate to other people”.

Rose commented:

“academic writing is challenging...my own academic writing, while it’s not of a very high calibre, I think I achieved a good level of it”.

Both Martin and Rose here seem to own their academic writing, that is, to perceive themselves as being engaged with it and having some control.

In order to offer a sharper articulation, the responses from student interviewees about their understanding of the nature of ‘academic writing’ were mapped on to Ivanič’s (2004:225) six categories of discourse underpinning approaches to academic writing (*Appendix 11*). Using Ivanič’s framework was a way of making visible the influence of different voices on participants’ approaches to their assessed writing and therefore to feedback practices. Table 5.3 includes brief quotes or summaries drawn from the nine student interviewees to illustrate how their comments suggest their awareness of particular discourses around writing in an academic context. The quotes and summaries are drawn from student interviewee responses to the specific ‘academic writing’ question (*Appendix 12.3*), within the context of my understandings of meanings intended in their interview transcripts more generally. Such awareness is indicated in Table 5.3 by ‘Yes evidence’ or ‘No evidence’. The former refers to evidence which indicates awareness of a discourse, whether or not it seems to be viewed positively, such as Carl’s comment of ‘properly referenced’ or negatively, such as Martin’s criticism of referencing conventions as “pedantic”. ‘No evidence’ indicates that there is no

evidence in the data of awareness of a particular discourse. Student interviewees' attitudes toward these discourses, together with the rationale for decisions regarding the categorisation of students' expressed ideas about academic writing and apparent overlaps between identified approaches are discussed below.

Table 5.3: Evidence of awareness of discourses around academic writing (Ivanič [2004:225]): students

SAMPLE	SKILLS DISCOURSE	CREATIVITY DISCOURSE	PROCESS DISCOURSE	GENRE DISCOURSE	SOCIAL PRACTICES DISCOURSE	SOCIO-POLITICAL DISCOURSE
BEN	<b>YES EVIDENCE</b> Talks of being “niggled” by grammatical correction	<b>NO EVIDENCE</b>	<b>NO EVIDENCE</b>	<b>YES EVIDENCE</b> Talks of the importance of context and the need for “long sentences” to explain fairly complicated ideas”	<b>YES EVIDENCE</b> Talks of communication to others outside field as being important	<b>NO EVIDENCE</b>
CARL	<b>YES EVIDENCE</b> Talks of the importance of texts being “properly referenced”	<b>NO EVIDENCE</b>	<b>YES EVIDENCE</b> Wanted a DVD to teach how to write.	<b>YES EVIDENCE</b> Talks of the need for texts to be “written in a certain way”	<b>YES EVIDENCE</b> Talks of academic writing as sharing ideas with academics	<b>NO EVIDENCE</b>
DAWN	<b>YES EVIDENCE</b> Talks of need for academic writing to be “grammatically correct”	<b>YES EVIDENCE</b> Talks of personal involvement, - “It has to be me”	<b>NO EVIDENCE</b>	<b>YES EVIDENCE</b> Focuses on the prestige of the academic text and its attributes	<b>YES EVIDENCE</b> Talks of clarity of academic writing for a particular purpose, it should be “technically publishable”	<b>YES EVIDENCE</b> Talks of wanting to express her independent voice
JULIE	<b>NO EVIDENCE</b>	<b>NO EVIDENCE</b>	<b>YES EVIDENCE</b> Emphasises the importance of teaching how to structure an academic text	<b>YES EVIDENCE</b> Talks of the “formula” text .	<b>NO EVIDENCE</b>	<b>NO EVIDENCE</b>
MARTIN	<b>YES EVIDENCE</b> Views referencing criticisms “pedantic”	<b>NO EVIDENCE</b>	<b>NO EVIDENCE</b>	<b>YES EVIDENCE</b> Critical of academic conventions	<b>YES EVIDENCE</b> Talks of the importance of communicating understanding to convey interpretations “to other people”	<b>NO EVIDENCE</b>
MARY	<b>NO EVIDENCE</b>	<b>NO EVIDENCE</b>	<b>YES EVIDENCE</b> Values process advice, explicit teaching about how to write	<b>YES EVIDENCE</b> Refers to wanting to be taught key features of academic texts (referencing), wants detailed feedback	<b>YES EVIDENCE</b> Emphasises the importance of audience, academic texts are “for people who are involved in the subject”	<b>NO EVIDENCE</b>

Table 5.3: Evidence of awareness of discourses around academic writing (Ivanič [2004:225]): students – continued

SAMPLE	SKILLS DISCOURSE	CREATIVITY DISCOURSE	PROCESS DISCOURSE	GENRE DISCOURSE	SOCIAL PRACTICES DISCOURSE	SOCIO-POLITICAL DISCOURSE
PHIL	NO EVIDENCE	NO EVIDENCE	NO EVIDENCE	YES EVIDENCE Views academic writing as a specific “framework”, a technique to be mastered.	YES EVIDENCE Talks of academic writing as involving being part of a community “designed to be shared with other people”	NO EVIDENCE
ROSE	YES EVIDENCE Values “perfect grammar”	NO EVIDENCE	NO EVIDENCE	YES EVIDENCE Talks of academic writing as involving specific text types, “special words”	NO EVIDENCE	NO EVIDENCE
TOM	NO EVIDENCE	YES EVIDENCE Talks of the importance of self-expression	YES EVIDENCE Points to various stages in writing, “I usually edit quite carefully”	YES EVIDENCE Points to academic writing involving a particular – and distant-style/discourse “It’s like a foreign language”	YES EVIDENCE Emphasises academic writing as communication with others	NO EVIDENCE

In terms of influential voices on students’ writing, Table 5.3 indicates evidence of awareness of what can be described as traces of the six discourses identified by Ivanič. Predominant is a ‘genre’ approach, with a theme of a common formula of requirements, “established conventions for the types of writing which are highly valued in the academy” (Ivanič, 2004:233). Ben explained:

“I usually think of academic work as long sentences explaining fairly complicated ideas and with a lot of factual evidence to support their arguments”.

That this could be specifically acquired was implied by Julie: “I learned what [academic writing] meant when I did the English course<sup>23</sup>.” A concept of a fixed practice, to be learned and applied, appeared evident in Phil’s idea that he had “nailed” academic writing conventions. Tom commented, “it’s a precise way of writing formally” and Carl responded similarly, “writing that is couched in an impersonal way...It’s written in the third person”.

Linked with these traces of what seem to be a genre approach to academic writing conventions are concerns about referencing requirements, voiced by students throughout the data, as evidenced by Carl, Martin and Mary (see [Table 5.3](#)). Whilst referencing is categorised here as belonging to a ‘genre’ approach, perspectives around referencing appear to take on some of the characteristics of ‘skills’, in the sense of explicit teaching, focused on accuracy. Hence, Carl’s and Martin’s comments on referencing are categorised under both ‘skills’ and ‘genre’ ([Table 5.3](#)): “properly referenced” (Carl). Martin appeared critical of the relative importance ascribed to referencing style within feedback on his assessed writing:

“even if you have got all the information there, if you’ve got a comma or you’ve not put something in italics that you should have done you’d have got it wrong...it’s probably equally as important as the content of the essay...the word that comes to mind is ‘pedantic’”.

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<sup>23</sup> No further details are available about what type of English course or where this was taken but the assumption from the context is that this was at the OU.

Julie, whilst critical also, accepted the necessity of this particular academic convention: “the referencing I thought was quite bizarre but that was the way it had to be done”.

Indeed, the contention and concern over referencing requirements is a theme in respect of students attempting to meet institutionally-valued expectations of academic writing expressed in tutor feedback. One student commented on the questionnaire: “Advice on referencing varies from tutor to tutor.”

More traditionally associated with a ‘skills’ approach is a focus on grammar, which emerged minimally. Whilst Dawn herself did not want specific teaching on rules, her definition of academic writing included “grammatically correct” and grammar seemed a concern for Rose also, as her definition of academic writing comprised:

“The opposite, I suppose, to writing in the vernacular or in everyday language...employs perfect grammar, perfect wording and some very obscure wording.”

Rose then described her difficulty in remembering “different parts of grammar that have special words attached to them”.

Turning to other approaches categorised by Ivanič (2004:225; *Appendix 11*; *Table 5.3*), there was minimal reference to a Creativity discourse, aside from Tom’s focus on self-expression and Dawn’s finding her own way: “It has to be me”. Indeed, Ben was clear that individual input was not regarded as important and Julie stated that academic writing was “not to do with my opinions”. The importance of communicating ideas lucidly, so for an imagined reader, which in this case is the tutor, is categorised here as ‘social practices’ discourse, because of its concern with effectiveness for a specific and valued purpose (Ivanič, 2004:225), which seemed to be a concern for Ben, Martin and

Dawn. Dawn defined academic writing as “well-structured with a clear argument”, although this comment might also signify a genre approach in respect of what is considered appropriate in academic writing. Concerns with structuring and composing work (evident also in questionnaire responses [Table 5.1]) can further be associated with a ‘process’ approach. Dawn, in wanting to express her independent voice (5.3.2): “It has to be me”, provides the only comment in respect of an approach to feedback on her academic writing that might be interpreted as ‘socio-political’ discourse, because of its association with the concept of the writer as a social agent (Ivanič, 2004:225), referring to the agency of a writer to select texts with which to engage, for example.

## 5.4 Summary

This chapter focused on the first of my research questions, *What are students’ perspectives around feedback practices on assessed writing?* I began by introducing the questionnaire and interview data regarding student perspectives around feedback on assessed writing (5.1). I presented brief profiles of the nine student interviewees, highlighting their experiences of and attitudes towards assessed/academic writing (5.2). I then explored this data from both a realist and an interpretivist lens, using the interpretivist framework derived from the three Bakhtinian notions identified in Chapter 3 as the overarching framework, considering language and communication as dialogic (5.3.1), as involving authoritative voice and internally persuasive discourse (5.3.2), and heteroglossia (5.3.3). I posed the three key related questions (Table 3.1). In answering the question - *What are students’ perspectives around feedback practices on assessed writing?* – from a realist lens, several key points emerge in this chapter.

- **Most students considered that tutor feedback on their assessed writing was important.** They said that they read tutors' written feedback comments thoroughly, a concern in the literature (Pitt and Norton, 2017). Tutor feedback was valued and students were generally satisfied with the feedback provided. Praise replaced criticism when students were asked for examples of unhelpful tutor feedback (questionnaire; [Table 5.2](#)). Interviewee, Mary emphasised the importance of feedback to her: "I think feedback is very important for the learner and the more detailed the better."
- **Most students (71 per cent, questionnaire) reported no student-tutor discussion following receipt of their written tutor feedback,** one student declaring a preference not to discuss feedback with a tutor. Both interviewees and questionnaire respondents ([Figure 5.1](#)) suggested that any student-tutor interaction following feedback was usually initiated by students.
- **Most students' preferred and used medium for student-tutor interaction around feedback was email,** with individual face-to-face communication in second place, including discussion with a tutor at a group tutorial. Whilst individual students gave different explanations for preferences, a common reason was to be clear about tutors' meaning within feedback. Interviewee, Julie explained her preference for email: "because you can read it several times".

In exploring the same question – *What are student's perspectives around feedback practices on assessed writing?* - from the Bakhtinian interpretivist lens, focusing on language and communication as dialogic, as involving authoritative voice and internally persuasive discourse, and heteroglossia and responding to the questions posed in Chapter 3 ([Table 3.1](#)), the following points emerge as significant.



- To what extent is the interaction that exists around feedback practices dialogic (in Bakhtinian terms)?* **A complex mix of apparent monologic and dialogic perspectives towards feedback on assessed writing were identified amongst students.** In one respect, written feedback containing a summative grade is monologic, perceived as “one-way” (interviewee, Mary). The concern for clarity and detail of institutionally-valued expectations (as indicated in [Tables 5.1](#) and [5.2](#)) suggests synthesis towards an institutionally-valued goal, as does students’ desire that feedback should feed forward to the next piece of assessed writing, a concern highlighted by Duncan (2007), for example. However, this need to understand another’s meaning can also be seen as an exchange of ideas with a more expert other. Julie, for example, views feedback which entailed the crossing out of her own writing as helping her to see what her tutor intends and she acknowledges “there is no right way”. Throughout the data, there are examples (in questionnaires and interviews) of students seeking understanding of the intended meaning from any authoritative voice and there is a tendency for students to want to “fathom out” (Carl) tutors’ meaning for themselves. Phil’s view of study as “constant learning” further suggests a dialogic approach. This complex mix of apparently monologic and dialogic perspectives is perhaps inevitable within a system where summative and formative feedback are conflated, in that advice on and discussion around writing and subject content are offered within feedback but are accompanied by a summative grade (a practice explained in 1.2.2).
- To what extent are particular voices perceived as authoritative and what evidence is there of the development of internally persuasive discourse?* **There is evidence of student reappropriation of apparent authoritative voices and of their**

**internally persuasive discourse** in, for example, students' ownership of their own learning paths: "It has to be me" (Dawn). There is evaluation of the authoritative voice, such as Rose's criticism of "obscure" study texts. There is evidence of students' reappropriating the authoritative voice of tutors and the summative grade in their response to feedback on their assessed writing. Whilst summative grading is, generally, seen as an authoritative measure of progress; tutor and institutional authority are respected and evaluated, rather than unthinkingly obeyed. Dawn, for example, sees the process of engaging with tutor feedback as "part of a game" and that study is "fun", suggesting that engagement with an authoritative, centripetal voice is a conscious choice and that a centrifugal counterpart, which seeks ownership of discourse, an internally persuasive voice, is evident.

- *Are there a range of voices that influence participants' perspectives around feedback practices?* **A range of voices potentially important in understanding student perspectives around feedback on assessed writing were identified,** including reasons for study ([Figure 5.2](#)), employment and prior educational experience, and approaches to academic writing ([Table 5.3](#)). 'Voices' here refer to those traces of discourses from concurrent or past experiences, persons or ideas which seem to be influential in participants' perspectives on feedback (and see 3.3.4). Seeking a qualification was not the only reason for study; 46 per cent of students included subject content as a reason for their participation in the module ([Figure 5.3](#)): "[my] main goal is to...understand the roots and evaluation of the English language" (questionnaire respondent). There was little evidence of influence on feedback practices or approaches towards assessed writing from other persons than tutors, either from outside the University context or from

fellow students. Group face-to-face tutorials were valued for interaction with the tutor about assessed writing, not with fellow students, Phil's wanting to "share a learning experience" being exceptional. Moreover, the anticipated influence of shared student contact via social media around feedback was not in evidence. There were two overall approaches to academic writing, one embedded and related to a sense of identity and another as separate, "books written by others" (Ben). An underpinning genre approach to academic writing, in the sense of a relatively fixed set of text types to be acquired and applied, was mainly predominant, "a precise way of writing formally" (Carl), which was particularly evident in relation to feedback through a concern with academic writing conventions. Employment and prior educational experiences also featured as influential voices on approaches to feedback. There was minimal recognition by students of voices influencing other participants in the feedback process, although time was acknowledged by one student as an influential voice for tutors.

The next chapter explores tutors' perspectives around feedback practices on assessed writing.

# CHAPTER 6

## TUTOR PERSPECTIVES AROUND FEEDBACK PRACTICES

### 6.1 Introduction

This chapter describes and discusses my findings in relation to my second research question: *What are tutors' perspectives around feedback practices on assessed writing?*

Data on tutor perspectives are analysed according to both realist and interpretivist approaches (see 4.6.1), the main interpretivist approach being the Bakhtinian heuristic as set out in Chapter 3, which is the overarching framework for structuring this chapter. The specific analytical tool of Ivanič's (2004) six discourses underpinning approaches to academic writing is again used. Findings are based primarily on an analysis of semi-structured interviews with the five tutor participants, supplemented by their questionnaire responses and their postings to the tutor online forum. (See Chapter 4 for details.)

The chapter begins by presenting brief profiles of the five tutor interviewees (6.2) and is then structured around the key themes arising from the Bakhtinian-informed heuristic (Table 3.1). These are: language and communication as dialogic (discussed in 6.3.1); authoritative voice and internally persuasive discourse (6.3.2); heteroglossia (6.3.3).

## 6.2 Tutor participants

Interviewees were: Andrew (aged 71); John (65); Cath (mid-40s); Alice (60-65); Vera (55). Andrew and John had tutored with the University for 11 years, Vera for seven and Cath and Alice for approximately four years. The tutors within this University are employed on a part-time contract basis for modules and are likely to have other paid employment. This was the case here only for John and Vera, although all had left other careers ([Table 4.4](#)). Andrew had had senior roles in the teaching profession; John had been a lithographic printer, police officer and tutor of literacy/numeracy and English to Speakers of Other Languages; Cath had been employed as Adult and Further Education lecturer and Housing Officer; Alice had lectured at another University; Vera had been a college lecturer in English for Academic Purposes and Italian. Andrew, John and Vera were studying, alongside their tutoring roles, Andrew for a professional doctorate, John for an Education MA and further Dance (assessment) qualifications and Vera for a second MA in Online and Distance Education. These biographical details, summarised in [Table 4.4](#), were supplied by tutors themselves. They are limited in comparison with details of students' profiles (5.2; *Appendix 3.7*) in order to protect anonymity, which is far less likely to be compromised for students due to their greater numbers. A sample tutor interview transcript (John's) is appended (*Appendix 9*)

## 6.3 Exploring tutor perspectives around feedback practices using a Bakhtinian-informed heuristic

### 6.3.1 Language and communication as dialogic: To what extent is the interaction that exists around feedback practices dialogic (in Bakhtinian terms)?

This section continues (from 5.3.1) to explore how far student-tutor interaction can be considered as dialogic in Bakhtinian terms but this time from tutors' perspectives. The Bakhtinian ideal of dialogue/dialogic, as ongoing engagement with another's word is, again, set alongside notions of 'monologic', which includes a 'dialectic' orientation towards meaning making, that can be seen as favouring one privileged truth (Lillis, 2003 and see 3.2 and 3.3.2).

What is meant by dialogue/dialogic in literature discussing feedback varies, both amongst researchers and within pedagogical discussions (and see 3.2). Here, I consider tutors' perspectives of the extent and nature of dialogue, in the sense of two-way student-tutor interaction, before exploring how far this can be considered dialogic in Bakhtinian terms.

I begin with a discussion of the written feedback comments, as part of the formal practice specified by the University, produced in an electronic (html) format (see 1.4.2). Tutor responses supported those of students, as outlined in the previous chapter, in suggesting that formal written feedback was read, although John and Alice thought that it received only a glance (questionnaire). Cath and Vera responded that feedback was read thoroughly, Cath commenting: "because I keep telling them through forum, email

and tutorials that they should read it". Similarly, Andrew reported that students read feedback, as "I've been encouraging them to do that all the time".

To an extent it appears that this formal written feedback itself is seen as dialogue by the tutors. For example, Alice reports using, within her written feedback, comments directed to students inviting discussion, such as: "Let's talk about this". Vera refers to the formal feedback as "dialogue", "communication" and "discussion". She explains that this written feedback was either "one-sided" (from her to the student): "You just tell them something and they just try to do the best they can" or, alternatively, "they will...start questioning what you said, sometimes too much". Vera's concept of dialogue, therefore, seems to be tutor-controlled and subject to an authoritative voice, that is one that is non-negotiable, not anticipating an answer; the "two voices" (Wegerif, 2008:348) are limited.

Tutors' preferred medium for further interaction around feedback following these formal written comments varied. Whilst tutors' responses to student questions on the online tutor group forum might potentially be considered as evidencing dialogue, John and Andrew indicated (questionnaires) they preferred this forum for imparting information to a group of students, again suggesting a monologic function. John favoured this communication medium to avoid confrontation with individual students, whereas Andrew explained his preference for email for engaging with students individually, following written comments, which he encouraged: "I promised that if they...email me I'll get back to them within twenty-four hours". Both speed and ease of response seemed perceived as an advantage of email as a medium. Andrew explained, "it's not that I'm against the 'phone but it's usually so much easier to do it by email". Student response and reaction seemed important for Andrew throughout his interview;

he continued, “and no one has really complained about that [his preference for email]”. When questioned whether email was the “best way” in every circumstance, Andrew explained,

“when they have had a lot of difficulties quite often then we do deal with it on the email...I mean their personal lives...it’s surprising how good sometimes the sort of link you get with the people you haven’t actually met”.

It seems, then, that Andrew used the online forum to convey information but email to maintain ongoing relationships with individual students, which might suggest a more dialogic orientation towards feedback, that is seeking an opportunity to explore and understand the views of the other (see 3.2).

Cath, too, preferred email, seemingly as a method of managing her interaction with students. She narrated its benefits within the context of a particular difficult relationship with one student as giving her

“time to go away and construct my response carefully...and if it had been on the ‘phone, I might have been upset and a bit, well, taken aback”.

Cath emphasised this advantage of email, “you’ve got time to really think about what you’re saying”. Cath here seems to consider it important to maintain some control and planning over the nature of her response to students.

Vera also appeared to want to control her interaction with students, but more authoritatively, in respect of limiting the amount of student response. Whilst for Vera any communication following formal feedback had “always been emails”, unlike Cath,



she did not extol their virtue. Rather, she used them “infrequently”, commenting: “I think the main issue here is how much discussion do you want with the student”.

Alice, signalling a desire for dialogue with students, like Andrew and Cath to an extent, seemed to focus more on the academic needs of her individual student addressees and her concern with generating an understanding between herself and them, so perhaps tending towards a more dialogic approach. Alice preferred to meet students in person:

“I find it much easier to engage in dialogue with students...if they have been to tutorials...because I know them”.

Alice explained the downside of not knowing students,

“it’s so much easier to come across as being patronising...or to misjudge the person and to misjudge what they would consider to be helpful dialogue”.

Coming to know students is therefore seen as an important basis for dialogue in meaningful feedback around writing. Further comments about tutor perspectives around dialogue on feedback can be interpreted from the frequent use they make of the term “constructive”. I interpret “constructive” as used in this context as the joint achievement of a perceived positive outcome for both students and tutors. Andrew, for example, discussing providing feedback where he needs to be critical of certain aspects of a student’s writing, states: “it’s the kind of painful bits...I want...to be...done in a way that’s as constructive as it possibly can be”. John commented, showing similar concern, “it’s about being constructive...without undermining them”. Cath used the term “constructive” repeatedly, but seemingly in the more dialectic/monologic sense of highlighting what is valued as end goal and working with students to meet this:

“but you’ve got to be constructive by **showing how things can be improved**...if people want to discuss...my feedback, I’m always happy to do that because you think well that dialogue’s really constructive”.

Alice and Vera are the only tutor interviewees who did not use the term “constructive” when discussing feedback and for seemingly different reasons. Alice, it appeared, was endeavouring to engage, so to interact meaningfully with students, not to construct or design a particular outcome, whilst Vera, rather, referred to “scaffolding” (her word choice), which perhaps implied controlled, expert guidance, rather than joint construction:

“You scaffold and the scaffolding is strong at the beginning and it is phased out little by little as you go towards the end” (meaning the final module assessment).

Vera appeared to adopt a ‘telling’, rather than a ‘constructing’, orientation towards feedback, through her description of her “strong” “scaffolding” and in that she “taught” how students writing should meet institutionally-valued expectations, commenting: “a lot of what I had taught them in previous feedbacks had been taken on board”.

However, labelling tutors’ approaches to dialogue as ‘monologic’/‘dialectic’ or ‘dialogic’ is not straightforward. Below, I explore how far these labels might be justified and, at the same time, indicate why orientations towards feedback are more complex than the labels might suggest.

John’s approach towards student-tutor interaction around feedback seems to be both authoritative and considerate; he was aware of addressees’ potential feelings and

responses. John declared he wanted to “gently direct” students. However, he appeared to perceive students *en masse*, as representatives of a type, rather than as individuals. He referred to the “typical sort of thing that happens with students” and commented:

“you don’t necessarily know what sort of student you’ve got initially do you? ... You don’t know if you’ve got the ‘hit me with everything you’ve got...I love being told what to do’...or the ‘I think I’m very good already’ and... ‘you’ll knock me off my pedestal’ type of student”.

Yet, John’s consideration for his individual students seems clear from his online forum contributions, which contain a series of postings<sup>24</sup>, indicating that he invested much time in supporting students, for example, in obtaining module information in different formats for a student with particular needs. Moreover, John’s questionnaire response to a closed question indicates that he viewed discussion around feedback as more effective if he knew a student, echoing the points made by Andrew and Cath above. At the same time, John explained that he tended to stand back from individual engagement with students, not only because of his limited time, but because of his reluctance to seem intrusive:

“I suppose an in-depth discussion...would have revealed that [the reason a student ignored his feedback comments] but again I don’t like to be that inquisitorial”.

John seems to be resisting monologic authority here, in that he appears to avoid using his inherent authority as tutor, to be what he sees as “inquisitorial”, that is too intrusive.

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<sup>24</sup> No details are given here to protect identities of tutors and students outside the research context.

Vera appeared to take an authoritative approach to the feedback process with her apparent reluctance to keep 'difference in play', in her view of feedback as often "one-sided", in wanting to avoid "too much" questioning from students and in adopting a 'telling' and 'scaffolding' approach to feedback, as discussed above. Yet, it became clear from her discourse that Vera felt she was responding to students' needs in relation to their achievement on the module, such as in her description, above, of her scaffolding strategy, although, like John, she tended to conceptualise student types together as homogenous groups: "You know what goes on in their heads"; "They think that's the only way." Vera, then, seemed aware of her students' academic needs, although in relation to her own construction of these, based on her tutoring experience ([Table 4.3](#)). In refuting the view that she felt students held of her as a "judge", Vera stated that she saw herself not as a judge but "as someone who gives feedback"; she might be considered to be rejecting a 'deficit'/monologic stance, differentiating this from her more apparent 'dialectic' approach, as her description of her 'scaffolding', above, testifies.

Cath, discussing her aims in providing feedback, reported having a clear textual goal and outcome: "I do have quite a clear idea in my mind about what they should be working towards". Cath here appears, like Vera, to be guiding students towards specific institutionally-valued expectations. However, Cath's discourse about interaction with students values clarity of meaning and communication and Cath recounted the challenges of doing so within her feedback:

"I don't think people actually understand when I ask them to be more explicit...and that's probably because I've not communicated that very

clearly...because in my mind it's really obvious...but obviously it's not to them".

Alice, too, expressed concern about the clarity of her message with feedback, "what seems to me to have been made clearly...in the feedback, they have missed it." Alice reflected that the academic convention, prevalent in feedback practices of hedging criticism, was obscuring her message:

"I think in my own style I'm not direct enough...all my criticisms are absolutely loaded with ...negative or positive politeness indicators...'I was a bit confused about x' which means...'it was bloody awful'...I'm mitigating to such an extent that...they don't see the main point that I'm making".

Alice here seems to be referring to her struggle between the tentative, more ostensibly dialogic, academic 'voice' (so not imposing an 'authoritative' stance) and the efficacy of a more direct (monologic) approach.

Alice, therefore, seemed to generally have a desire for the perceived efficiency of an authoritative, monologic approach to feedback. However, this monologic approach was evident only in Alice's comments about academic writing conventions and language. Regarding subject content, Alice appeared to want to encourage challenge, to keep 'difference in play', "really getting them to come back and talk to me about things". She reported inviting comment about subject content within her written feedback: "Let's talk about this when you've had a chance to have a look at my feedback". Alice explained: "I address them directly. I say, 'What do you think?...have I understood this correctly? Let's talk'" but she remarked on the difficulty of getting students "to come back and talk about things, to give me an alternative". Alice seemed disappointed that:

“they don’t challenge me...they don’t say, ‘I think you’re wrong’” and commented that she would find such a challenge “quite stimulating” and “would see that as very interesting dialogue”. Alice, then, bemoaned her students’ perceived tendency to want her “to be the guru”. She appeared to suggest that any admission of not being such, or inviting questions unsettles students: “they can be a bit uncomfortable with me saying, you know, ‘I’m not sure about that’”, adding,

“in early days, perhaps I would say, ‘this isn’t really my area in linguistics’ and they seriously didn’t like that”.

However, whilst she wanted to be challenged with regard to content – desiring and encouraging dialogue - Alice’s orientation to academic language and writing conventions seemed monologic.

“I was really talking about more in terms of content...When it comes to the actual sort of process of writing, then I think I tend to be rather prescriptive.”

Andrew foregrounded a particular dimension to feedback practices, appearing to be continually aware of his addressees’ emotional responses to feedback, explaining “people’s academic...identities are very fragile”. Andrew twice mentioned “relationship” when discussing students, perhaps further indicating his concern about students’ reaction to feedback and the nature of tutor-student interaction. However, Andrew seemed to take a dialectic approach pedagogically in that he focused on the goal of improving grades, according to the set marking criteria: “I’ve tried to...show them where they are and how they can get to the next stage”, seeing his role as to “steer

people through”, phrases linked to a scaffolding approach (see 3.2), although seemingly more tentative than Vera’s apparently authoritative stance.

Formal written feedback, then, is seen by tutors as interaction with students, to an extent. Various modes are preferred for further discussion, a favourite being email, partly to maintain control of the interaction, from planning the reply to limiting the amount of student-tutor communication. A strong tendency towards the monologic/dialectic end goal is evident in approaches towards feedback, with tutors Andrew and Alice, in particular, showing concern in the process to know and maintain positive relationships with students, Alice encouraging a more dialogic approach towards subject content.

This apparent complexity of approaches towards interaction around feedback is also manifested in tutors’ perspectives around authoritative voices within the feedback process, as explored below.

### 6.3.2 Authoritative voice and internally persuasive discourse: *To what extent are particular voices perceived as authoritative and what evidence is there of the development of internally persuasive discourse?*

In this section, I explore tutors’ perspectives in respect of their own and other authoritative voices around feedback practices within a supposed institutional hierarchy ([Figure 1.1](#)) and the extent to which they reference their own personal independence or agency (Mraović, 2008:292 and see 3.3.3). The inherent and unchallenged power of the Bakhtinian concept of authoritative voice and its internally

persuasive counterpart (Bakhtin [1934/35], 1981:270-2; 342 and see 3.3.3) are, again, applied here.

Tutors' allusions to their own authoritative voices as providers of feedback on and assessment of students' writing varied. As discussed (3.3.3), grading is traditionally perceived as inherently authoritative with "embodied capital" (Thesen, 2006:156), that is, inherent, valued authority. Only John and Vera refer to their inherent authority through assessment directly and in so doing seem to perceive themselves as authoritative voices. John explained that he used grading as a form of control when his repeated feedback comments were ignored:

"I've had students where I've made the same comment three times, something quite important, and it's only when on one or two occasions I've translated that into a fairly severe approach to marking the next assignment that I've had a reaction...On the third occasion, I've once or twice failed something which probably...wouldn't have failed if it had been the first assignment."

John here seems to be using the inherent and apparently unchallenged authority accorded to him by the institution to grade students' writing as a way of reinforcing expected and valued institutional standards conveyed via his feedback.

Vera perceived that her assessor role was viewed as powerful by students:

"there's a whole vocabulary that indicates that they see themselves as poor victims of the tutor...with an eye for some weapon...that hits them by reducing marks".



Vera added that students use language which “clearly indicates that they see us as judges”. Vera then outlined her own view: “we are [judges] in a way...but I don’t see the marking as that”. Vera explained that she did not feel she made judgements on students regarding their opinions when providing her feedback. She commented on one particular student’s complaint:

“I wasn’t marking him down...I was just making a comment”, adding “a lot of them [students] see the feedback as a list of errors”.

The concept of judging and being judged seems to pervade Vera’s discourse, as when she reflected on what she signalled as the apparent conflict between feedback and grading as both formative and summative:

“We are trying to give advice for them to improve and get higher marks but at the same time we are judging.”

This focus on improvement seems part of a prescriptive authoritative theme of Vera’s discourse, as evidenced by her declared aim of written feedback to feed forward to future assessment. She stated that her focus was to:

“explain what was good and what was not so good...anything I can think of that the student could do to...understand what they did well and what they didn’t do so well”.

Cath, like Vera, focused on the task of “showing how things can be improved”. She explained, “I want to see progression” and that she made feedback detailed “so that it’s very clear how they can improve”. Cath, again, like Vera, was unequivocal and authoritative about what was valued and cited “rushing” and “arrogance” as reasons why students might not heed her criticisms.

Vera's concept of 'improvement' relates specifically to the assessment/marketing criteria (*Appendix 10.2*), agreed by central academics, and shared between tutors and students.

Vera seemed to perceive her authority to judge what is/is not valued within her feedback on students' assessed writing as derived from the marking criteria and seeing it as her responsibility to implement these. Vera apparently rejected any agency to stray from guidelines in the sense, for instance, of John's interpretation of the marking criteria to reinforce his feedback comments, as discussed above, in relation to using a marking penalty to address a student repeatedly not following his feedback advice.

Vera commented:

"I disagree with impressionistic marking; I would ideally want descriptors for each [assignment] and possibly model answers".

Vera, then, seemed to want more specific and categoric marking criteria, complaining: "there is no standardisation in the way we give feedback, in the way we mark". By "standardisation", Vera appears to mean a system which erases "impressionistic" judgements on students' writing and, therefore, possibly any tutor agency in this respect.

"Standardisation" was a theme of Vera's throughout interview, so I asked her about the extent of standardisation that she wanted; Vera stated: "really the whole thing" by which she seemed to mean all aspects of the feedback and assessment process.

"Standardisation" was also mentioned by Alice, but, rather, in respect of parity of judgement between tutors:

“in terms of standardisation, I have noticed some divergence of opinions on the tutor forum, e.g. on what should be penalised/not penalised in terms of [an assignment] answer.”

Whilst Alice’s use of “penalised” appears to be an example of authoritative discourse, she seemed to resist being pulled towards an authoritative approach, as discussed in 6.3.1, in relation to her inviting “challenge” on issues of subject content.

Following the above consideration of tutors’ perceptions of their own authoritative voices in the feedback process, I next consider tutors’ perspectives of the potential authoritative voices of the institution and students.

Contrary to the apparent hierarchical institutional structure around feedback practices ([Figure 1.1](#)), tutors did not perceive central academics as having a strong authoritative voice for tutors, at least directly. Andrew reported “very little” specification from any institutional source on feedback practices (questionnaire) and when asked about this within interview answered: “Yes I think it’s very much up to you” and the only guidance he had had was “the conversation at the moderating<sup>25</sup> meetings” where he “just sort of picked up” the module team chair’s views on grading. Cath responded with “No” when asked about specification from “above”. John referred to a “system”, rather than a hierarchy, that: “does enable a sort of workmanlike appraisal”, which he deemed a “feature of the OU approach” of

“giving guidance that has allowed tutors to form their own opinions about what’s important for given [assignments]”.

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<sup>25</sup> A meeting with the module chair for those tutors who mark the final summative assessment

Alice commented similarly: “In what I say, and how I say it, yes, I feel that I’m left to make my own comments”. Vera perceived “a lot of freedom” (questionnaire) with marking generally. However, Vera’s comments about wanting more detailed, specific guidance, discussed above, suggest that she viewed her own apparent agency here negatively. Vera seemed to prefer her own position within the hierarchy to be more explicit and centralised and the institution to represent more of an authoritative voice, as her repeated apparent desire for “standardisation” (see above) suggests. When I asked Vera for any final comments, she responded:

“it would be nice to have some extra help from the module team on what they actually expect”.

However, what is expected by the institution, including by central academics on the module team, seems to be conveyed via the more indirect authoritative institutional voices of the marking criteria and the monitoring system of tutors’ feedback (discussed below).

Vera’s wish for more detailed, prescriptive grading criteria to facilitate the standardisation of tutors’ feedback practices seems to negate any agency, the creativity and independence of thought associated with internally persuasive discourse (Bakhtin [1934/35], 1981:345 and see 3.3.2). However, other tutors appeared to view the marking criteria as institutional guidance and support, rather than as absolute authority.

Andrew explained, “the guidance I use is the...grades to be honest”. Cath explained that in referring to the assessment guidance, she was “trying to be quite objective” and the criteria “make it easier to grade”. John described assessment as

“informed subjectivity...one makes an holistic judgement...it would be difficult without the assessment criteria, I think”.

Alice seemed to value the grading criteria, because, like Vera, she disagreed “strongly with impressionistic marking” as it “becomes too subjective”. Both Alice and Vera wanted model answers to be provided, Alice as a teaching tool to show students what is valued summatively and Vera for her own guidance on grading, as discussed above.

A further way that the institution, including central academics, might appear as an authoritative voice is via the University’s system of monitoring of tutor feedback. Monitoring is central to the University’s practice and involves a selection of tutor feedback and grading being reviewed and judged as ‘satisfactory’ or otherwise either by a member of the module team or by a tutor contracted and trained to do so on their behalf. The results are communicated to the Regional Managers (represented by Sam in this study [see Chapter 7]). Tutors’ views of the monitoring of their feedback varied from unequivocal authoritative voice to non-hierarchical and supportive peer feedback, as discussed below.

Tutor Vera appeared to view monitoring as an authoritative voice and as such part of the guidance she wanted and, again, felt should be “standardised”. However, Vera’s negative response to monitor criticism pervaded her discourse. Vera mentioned the monitor’s perspective as significant, unprompted by me, referring to monitoring issues twelve separate times from six minutes into her interview up to the final two minutes, for example: “The key issue I think is with this one monitor who thought it actually wrong to give so much [feedback]”. Other monitors approved Vera’s feedback: “frequent monitors said...they thought they [Vera’s feedback comments] were really

good” but Vera added, “this monitor was not going to give me the ‘Excellent’ I was used to.”

Whilst Vera wanted authoritative voices to ensure standardisation of tutors’ feedback, she, evidently, did not perceive this authority as absolute with “unconditional allegiance” (Bakhtin [1934/35].1981:341), evidenced by her questioning of its judgement here. Other tutors, too, seem to appropriate the apparent authoritative voices of both grading criteria and monitoring to the extent that this might lose any absolute authority but be re-interpreted as part of a “double-voice narration” (page 341).

For example, whilst monitoring was managed by central academics and used as a measurement of tutor performance, it became clear that tutors, such as Alice and John, perceived monitoring as peer feedback, because fellow tutors were frequently contracted as monitors, problematising a distinction between tutors and central academics within this process. Indeed, John referred to monitors as “all tutors as well”<sup>26</sup> and expressed envy of tutor monitors:

“it must be a wonderful thing...to have that overview of what other people are doing. It must be very helpful with their own work.”

Alice, too, seemed to view monitoring as peer feedback, rather than performance measurement, finding monitoring reports “useful”:

“I get stuck in my rut...and suddenly you see another perception and I find that very good to think, ‘Oh good; I hadn’t thought of that’”.

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<sup>26</sup> This is not actually the case; monitors usually comprise a mix of tutors and central academics, as explained.

Andrew appeared to view monitoring as dialogue, rather than the imposition of an authoritative voice:

“I always respond to the comments I get from my monitor...she thought I’d been lenient and you know I agreed”.

Cath perhaps veered towards a more authoritative quality control approach, as she had recently become a tutor monitor herself and was concerned about disparity between tutors: “the quantity of feedback varies quite a lot from tutor to tutor”.

The above comments regarding monitoring as peer feedback suggest a desire amongst tutors to find out about other tutors’ practices as a measure of the appropriateness of their own approaches, perhaps because of the relative isolation of tutors within this distance learning context. Further evidence of this is Andrew’s checking with me (a colleague) throughout his interview about the value of his answers to my questions: “Is that legitimate?” and asking: “I’m just thinking now should I be speaking to them [students] more often?” Alice, having explained that her online tutor forum was not particularly active, commented “but I’m sure other tutors can get it going”.

Whilst monitoring seemed to be viewed as both authoritative voice and constructive dialogue with peers, the same appeared to be untrue for another type of judgement relating to tutor feedback practices within this University, the reports on tutors provided by students. Students’ views of tutor support, including feedback, are elicited formally at the end of each module’s presentation and appear on tutors’ records<sup>27</sup>. Initially, I perceived this formal feedback of student opinion as an ‘authoritative’ voice ([Figure 1.1](#)) and, whilst valued by the institution as gauging ‘good’ practice (see Chapter

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<sup>27</sup> I understand that this system has been reviewed recently.

7), it does appear to be part of an ongoing tension. Macfadyen *et al* (2016:821) note, in their multi-level analysis of the evaluation of their teaching by students:

“few practices in educational settings evoke emotional debate as rapidly as student evaluation of teaching”,

which they claim is due to the general belief “amongst educators” that evaluations report on teacher popularity.

The potential impact of student feedback on a tutor’s perspective is illustrated by Andrew’s narrative of a “particularly...terrible” conflict with a student which permeated the second part of his interview. Andrew reported that the student had written, “this long official complaint about me: ‘You’re the worst tutor I’ve ever had’”. Andrew concluded:

“you can get fifteen...complimentary comments but the one that isn’t is the one that sticks in your mind and...you can’t get rid of”.

Clearly, some students’ response to tutors’ authority, their “given opportunity to challenge, contest and change” (Mraović, 2008:289) is, understandably, a negative experience for tutors. Vera explained that one of the reasons she provides “plenty of [formal, written] feedback” is that it “protects me from any negative feedback and emails afterwards”, which she identified as one type of student response to her feedback comments:

“they say nothing and they wait until [the end-of-year student feedback on tuition] where they start saying your feedback wasn’t what they expected”.



Vera's seemingly defensive reaction is evident amongst other tutors' accounts of student criticism also, with an accompanying desire to either avoid or resolve conflict.

John's wish to avoid confrontation with students was a prominent theme in his interview, although the language of conflict emerged in his questionnaire responses, where he referred to "easy win topics", citing the example of referencing, by which I interpret he meant issues for which there appear agreed 'right/wrong' positions, suggesting a contesting approach. Alice did not mention student feedback but explained that she would not wish to look at online student fora, "because I don't want the students to say what a lousy tutor I was, I suppose". Cath, rather than 'win' the distressing conflict with a student she related, seemed to aim for resolution, reporting a "happy ending".

Thus, tutors' accounts of their own authority, such as authority inherent in their allocation of grades within their feedback, varied. There were different perspectives evident around the potentially indirect authoritative institutional voices of the grading criteria and the monitoring system, from one of wanting standardisation, so inhibiting tutor agency, to one of guidance, support and negotiation. Students' authoritative voices in feeding back on tutor performance were perceived defensively as negative.

Below I consider the range of voices potentially influencing tutors' approaches to feedback practices around assessed writing.

### 6.3.3 Heteroglossia: Are there a range of voices that influence participants' perspectives around feedback practices?

In this section, I explore the different influential voices (see 1.2.1, 3.3.4 and 5.3.3) on tutors' perspectives on the feedback process, in relation to my operationalisation of Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia (Bakhtin [1934/35], 1981:296 and see 3.3.4). I include consideration of any recognition by tutors of potentially influential voices on feedback on other participant groups - central academics and students.

The main voices potentially influencing tutors' perspectives around feedback practices identified and explored here are: the traces of discourses from concurrent or past experiences, persons or ideas which seem to be influential, underpinning awareness of discourses around and approaches towards academic writing and the concept of time, which is related to the amount of tutors' paid contracted time. Time references an institutional voice of what is expected, recognised and valued in relation to feedback practices and is further important in considering tutors' roles in feedback practices within the context of their wider lived experiences (see 3.3.4).

In exploring the extent of influential voices from tutors' experiences outside the University context, I refer back to the biographical details provided by tutor participants themselves ([Table 4.4](#) and 6.2).

Andrew's ongoing experience as a student clearly influenced his attitudes towards providing feedback. He explained: "I'm thinking now not just of...the stuff I'm doing for my students but of what I've...received myself".

Whilst John, too, was a student alongside his tutoring role, it was his previous student experiences that he claimed influenced his perspectives around student feedback. John

reported that as a student he had been “too literary in style, rather purple at times” which he appeared to interpret as opposed to “the best approach with linguistics which is really a kind of social science”. He realised the need to direct students “towards being more scientific”. When commenting that students did not read his written feedback thoroughly, John added: “I’ll confess that very often I didn’t read my own feedback when I was a student” because, “it was a time issue”. John did not explore whether “time” was an issue for his students, too, not wishing to intrude, be “too inquisitorial”. This concern about being “too inquisitorial” appeared to originate from John’s experience as a dance competition judge and dance press reporter ([Table 4.4](#)). John criticised fellow reporters who named competitors:

“And personally I try to avoid that because people find that a bit confrontational. I much prefer...to say, ‘I noticed this type of problem at this event’ and you don’t necessarily have to name the individual although they may get the hint that it’s them”.

John made an explicit connection with his tutoring: “I find the tutor [group] forum<sup>28</sup> quite good in that way”. Also evident is the way that John’s role as a dance judge transferred to his control through grading decisions in his tutor feedback, discussed above (6.2) and to a seemingly binary, ‘deficit’ judgement of students’ skills. John commented, “academic writing is a skill...that is not necessarily in good supply amongst students”. A further influential voice on John’s language choice and approach to feedback might be his thirty years as a police officer ([Table 4.4](#)). He described students

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<sup>28</sup> An online forum for students and the tutor for each tutor group.

who he perceived making mistakes as “offending individuals” in the same way that he criticised dancers as “offenders”.

Cath, however, did not refer to connections between her feedback and her experiences outside this University context but to her concurrent role as a monitor of tutor feedback within the institution, which led her to reflect further on the student experience. She had read comments from some tutors “whose feedback seems to be longer than the student’s work”, so she edited her own feedback: “I’m thinking if I’m a student reading that, am I going to be so overwhelmed?”

Alice’s previous experience as an HE tutor in an institution that offered face-to-face tuition appeared a constant influence on her desire to challenge students within a controlled environment. It was her given reason for wanting a model for her own feedback:

“I would like to see other people’s feedback...I worked somewhere else and...you so often did see other people’s feedback...and it was illuminating”.

It also appeared to be the reason Alice wanted to provide model assignments for her own students: “in my previous work I might spend a whole seminar...just looking at past [assignments]”. When we discussed (as colleagues) within interview the type of errors we felt were most serious in terms of grading, Alice responded “not answering the question is a massive issue for me”, explaining:

“We sort of had a thing before, you know, that people who hadn’t answered the question failed, you know, where I worked before and this is why I think I’m so extremely hung up on this.”

Alice also referred to her previous employment (as a lecturer at another University) in her (infrequent) online tutor forum contributions:

“I know from experience elsewhere how hard it is at the outset for students to get the hang of these sorts of questions”.

There was little evidence of tutors’ recognition of influential voices on students from outside the University context and none regarding central academics in relation to feedback practices. Andrew was the one tutor who mentioned students’ personal circumstances: a holiday, a mental condition. Yet, Vera’s quoting of a student’s comment, in support of her claim that students did read her feedback, illustrates how far University study is an integral part of students’ lives: the student had told Vera, “my husband reads out loud your comments while I’m cooking”.

However, the voices of other tutors were identified as an influential voice on students’ assessed writing. Andrew explained that a dissatisfied student: “had a tutor the previous year who thought his writing was marvellous”, whereas, for Andrew, the student’s work “was dreadful”. Cath commented: “there’s been some things where they’ve got different advice [from tutors]...so that’s been a tricky one”. When prompted specifically, Alice replied: “I suppose...an outside influence could well be that they are going to other tutorials”.

Social media was, again, not perceived as a significant influence on students’ practices around feedback, contrary to what I had anticipated (4.4.3), echoing findings relating to students (5.3.3), which also suggested minimal influence from social media on their assessed writing and approaches to tutor feedback. Whilst John acknowledged an “element” of concern from other tutors and that students “do use social media” his

response, “it hasn’t been for me a huge issue” seemed to be the overall view. Cath was the only tutor who expressed particular concern about student use of Facebook and then only when prompted. She referred to how Facebook discussion might be having some impact on students’ interpretation of assessment guidelines and expectations without any input from tutors or central academics:

“it’s like sort of Chinese Whispers once...something’s out there...it’s spreading...and there’s no tutors, no module team monitoring”.

#### 6.3.3.1 Voices influencing perspectives on academic writing (Ivanič, 2004)

Tutors’ responses to the question about their perceptions of academic writing are appended in full (*Appendix 12.4*) and Table 6.1 indicates evidence of particular discourses, again, as with the analysis of student interviewees’ responses (5.3.3.2, Table 5.3), in relation to Ivanič’s (2004:225) six discourses (see 4.6.3 and *Appendix 11*).

Table 6.1: Evidence of awareness of discourses around academic writing (Ivanič [2004:225]):  
tutors

SAMPLE	SKILLS DISCOURSE	CREATIVITY DISCOURSE	PROCESS DISCOURSE	GENRE DISCOURSE	SOCIAL PRACTICES DISCOURSE	SOCIO-POLITICAL DISCOURSE
ANDREW	NO EVIDENCE	NO EVIDENCE	NO EVIDENCE	YES EVIDENCE Talks of an “appropriate standard”, “particular kind of register”	YES EVIDENCE Indicates social purpose -the text is “going to be read by other people”	YES EVIDENCE Expresses interest in “people’s academic... Identities’
JOHN	YES EVIDENCE Refers to “easy win” issues, like referencing – (seems to see as right/wrong issue)	NO EVIDENCE	NO EVIDENCE	YES EVIDENCE Talks of “generic forms of writing”, “register based on terminology”	YES EVIDENCE Refers to social purpose of writing	NO EVIDENCE
CATH	NO EVIDENCE	NO EVIDENCE	NO EVIDENCE	YES EVIDENCE Talks of the “right kind of register” “using some of the academic conventions”	YES EVIDENCE Indicates importance of communicating with others through “clear argument” and clarity	NO EVIDENCE
ALICE	NO EVIDENCE	YES EVIDENCE Talks of academic writing including “personal reflections”	NO EVIDENCE	YES EVIDENCE Talks of a “variety of text types”, of wanting models to show what is valued	YES EVIDENCE Indicates importance of audience “not all people will appreciate it” (in the context of examiners and grading)	YES EVIDENCE Talks of appreciating challenges on assignment topics/subjects
VERA	YES EVIDENCE Refers to “skills” that can be learned, indicates value of standard punctuation	NO EVIDENCE	YES EVIDENCE Talks of the development time and process of academic writing	YES EVIDENCE Talks of “certain conventions” and texts falling “within a certain genre”	YES EVIDENCE Talks of writing as a marker of belonging to an academic community: “writing for academic purposes”	NO EVIDENCE

Although traces of a number of discourses are evident, as with students, common to all tutors was strong evidence of a genre approach. John's definition of academic writing as "a fairly broad group of generic forms of writing" and Alice's "a variety of text types" were typical. All tutors' responses regarding effective feedback featured aspects of academic writing or assignment construction. Moreover, tutors' interpretation of genre, as students', appeared quite fixed, to be acquired and applied. For example, Vera's definition of academic writing seemed to support her belief in defined boundaries about what is valued: "it's all about becoming part of that [academic] community and therefore following the rules". The 'correct/incorrect' approach to referencing seems, as with students, to be almost in the 'skills' category. Tutor Cath, for instance, commented:

"I kept telling one of my students in the [feedback form] that she should follow the referencing conventions and, after being told twice, she finally referenced correctly."

No clear evidence of a creativity discourse emerged, except that Alice felt some set writing tasks included "personal reflections", although she qualified this, reporting that she tells students to "be careful about being too personal and subjective". Only Vera made specific reference to a skills discourse, in her valuing of standard punctuation, for example: "I explain it [comma usage] in their terms and they start putting full stops". All referred to a social practices discourse to an extent, in the recognition that writing was to be "read by other people" (Andrew) and so needed to be "clear" (Cath) and therefore of value in a particular social context. Andrew and Alice seemed to relate to a socio-political discourse, again to a limited degree, Alice in her preference for being



challenged on subject content and Andrew through his concern about “people’s academic...identities”.

### 6.3.3.2 Time and feedback

A key influence evident in tutors’ approaches to feedback is the constraint of time. As mentioned above (6.3.3), references to time seem to suggest an institutional voice conveying what is expected and valued within feedback practices in relation to tutors’ paid contracted time. Time features as salient in the literature in relation to workload pressures (2.4.3) with the amount of tutor time and effort highlighted, for example, by O’Donovan *et al* (2016), Scott (2014) and Tuck (2013; 2012). Time was also an apparent concern from my ‘insider’ perspective, particularly in view of the part-time contracts for tutoring in this institution, within which both tutors and students work primarily within their home environments surrounded by other aspects of their lives.

The relationship between time and institutional expectations is evident in the discourse of John, Vera and Cath. John, for example, when talking about a focus on English as a second language within feedback, for which “there isn’t any time”, states:

“typically the non-L1 English you know student whose English is shaky you can do a certain amount in your feedback, but maybe a total deconstruction of their use of English throughout their essay each time would put us way beyond the amount of time we are paid for”.

I then asked John how far the “constraints on tutor time”, to which he had referred, were an issue. He replied:

“I think it’s fair to say that there is a relatively high incidence...of tutors giving more time than they are paid...They will spend you know several hours over an assignment that they are paid forty minutes to work on...and that works tolerably well, particularly where people have small numbers of students and they are very interested in their subject but...you notice the creaks in the joints when student numbers increase and you are forced back on to time limits which are nearer to the realistic ones.”

Vera mentioned being “pressed for time” on occasions, in the context of mentioning her decision not to reduce her feedback comments despite this. Vera explained one reason for wanting more guidance from the module team on what students should be covering in assignments, as

“the module team wrote the [assignment questions], [they] keep changing them, so they don’t even give us enough time to learn exactly what they are about”.

Cath’s particular concern was time taken by students’ telephone calls which took “up a lot of my time” and “when I might be in the middle of something”. Regarding a particular student call, Cath explained: “It totalled an hour in one-to-one tuition, which I didn’t want to give her”, adding, “this person got an hour for free”.

Alice, notably, discussed extra sessions to discuss feedback that she offered without reference to time constraints.

This section has considered a range of influential voices on tutors’ approaches to their feedback on assessed writing, with a particular focus on the influence of work and educational experiences beyond the current University context, underpinning

awareness of discourses around and approaches towards academic writing and with a final section on the issue of time, indicating an institutional voice.

## 6.4 Summary

This chapter focused on the second of my research questions, *What are tutors' perspectives around feedback practices on assessed writing?* I began by summarising the data relating to tutors' perspectives around feedback practices (6.1) and introducing the five tutor interviewees (6.2). I then again explored this data both through a realist and an interpretivist lens, using the overarching interpretivist framework derived from the three Bakhtinian notions identified in Chapter 3 (6.3), considering: language and communication as dialogic (6.3.1), as involving authoritative voice and internally persuasive discourse (6.3.2), and heteroglossia (6.3.3). I again posed the three key related questions (see [Table 3.1](#)).

In answering the question - *What are tutors' perspectives around feedback practices on assessed writing?* – from a realist lens, the following key points emerge in this chapter.

- **Tutors perceived that their feedback was read by students**, if not always thoroughly, following tutor encouragement to do so.
- **Email was a valued method of communication with students following written feedback** for speed and ease and an element of control over interaction allowing tutors “time to go away and construct my response” (Cath) and was considered to be appropriate too, even where there are “a lot of difficulties” (Andrew), although preferred methods for communication further to written

feedback varied. Alice considered face-to-face group tutorials important for knowing students in order to avoid misjudging them.

- **Standardisation of grading within feedback via the marking criteria was considered important** for parity between students by some tutors and to avoid “impressionistic” marking (Vera).

In exploring the same question - *What are tutors’ perspectives around feedback practices on assessed writing?* - through an interpretivist lens, focusing on language and communication as dialogic, as involving authoritative voice and internally persuasive discourse, and heteroglossia and responding to the questions posed in Chapter 3 ([Table 3.1](#)), the following points emerge as significant.

- *To what extent is the interaction that exists around feedback practices dialogic (in Bakhtinian terms)?* **Approaches tended towards the monologic/dialectic with some orientation towards dialogic feedback.** There was evidence of a dialectic orientation in the emphasis on clarity of message and synthesis in texts throughout most tutors’ discourse: “I do have a clear idea in my mind what they should be working towards” (Cath). However, there was some conflict and differentiation between monologic and dialectic approaches to feedback:

“We are trying to give advice for them to improve and get higher marks but at the same time we are judging” (Vera).

Alice took a dialogic approach with regard to subject content, wanting “challenge” but a monologic approach in respect of academic writing conventions, about which Alice explained that she “tends to be rather

prescriptive". There was concern for student emotional response to feedback, particularly from Andrew and John, who wanted to avoid being "inquisitorial".

- *To what extent are particular voices perceived as authoritative and what evidence is there of the development of internally persuasive discourse?* **Tutors recognised a perception of their own inherent authority and agency via the grading criteria within feedback and authoritative voices affecting tutors' feedback practices emerged strongly.** Vera described students' perception of tutors' allocation of marks within feedback as "some weapon". In actuality, summative marking criteria were seen as institutional guidance with some agency, which John described as "informed subjectivity" allowing "tutors to form their own opinions about what's important". Whilst a direct authoritative voice from central academics was not explicitly noted, this appears to be perceived as indirectly present by some tutors through the monitoring of their feedback, viewed as authoritative voice but sometimes as supportive peer feedback. Students' authoritative voices in feeding back on tutor performance were perceived defensively as negative and to "stick in your mind" (Andrew).
- *Are there a range of voices that influence participants' perspectives around feedback practices?* **Influential voices on tutors' feedback practices were evident,** such as from previous employment as in Alice's lecturing role at another University where tutor feedback practices were shared. Tutors' recognition of perceived influences on students' approaches to feedback were minimal and mainly concerned alternative academic advice, "a tricky one" (Cath). The critical comments I had anticipated about the influence of social media on assessed writing conflicting with tutor feedback advice generally did not arise. There was a predominantly genre orientation towards academic writing, though

other discourses, such as social practices, were also evident. Time constraints, in relation to tutors' contracted, paid time, seemed a significant influential voice for most tutors, in respect, for example, of feedback practices taking "way beyond the amount of time we are paid for" (John).

The next chapter explores the institution's perspectives around feedback on assessed writing, the institution being represented by central academics and extracts from official documentation.

# CHAPTER 7

## INSTITUTIONAL PERSPECTIVES AROUND FEEDBACK PRACTICES

### 7.1 Introduction

This chapter describes and discusses my findings in relation to my third research question: *What are the institution's perspectives around feedback practices on assessed writing?* The institution's perspectives are represented in this study primarily by central academics and also by official documentation. Data on institutional perspectives are analysed according to both realist and interpretivist approaches (see 4.6.1), the main interpretivist approach being the Bakhtinian heuristic set out in Chapter 3, which forms the overarching framework for this chapter. The specific analytical tool of Ivanič's (2004) six discourses underpinning approaches to academic writing is also used. Findings are based mainly on an analysis of data from the semi-structured interviews with three central academics, supplemented by brief extracts from official documentation and questionnaire responses from two of the interviewees. (See Chapter 4 for details.)

This chapter begins by presenting brief professional profiles of the three central academic participants (7.2) and is then structured around the key themes arising from the Bakhtinian-informed heuristic ([Table 3.1](#)). These are: language and communication

as dialogic (discussed in 7.3.1); authoritative voice and internally persuasive discourse (7.3.2); heteroglossia (7.3.3).

As explained in 4.7, throughout this discussion central academics are referred to by their pseudonyms, Sam, Alex and Pat, which are not substituted by gendered personal pronouns, she/he, to avoid compromising their anonymity.

## **7.2 Central academic participants**

In this section, I introduce the three central academic participants, further to [Table 4.5](#), which summarised their institutional roles and responsibilities.

Sam, a region-based academic, had responsibility for the local delivery of modules, the appointment and management of tutors and of student-tutor professional relationships. Alex, representing the module team and based centrally at the University headquarters in Milton Keynes, was cooperatively responsible for designing and supervising module content and assessment and for monitoring tutor feedback. Contact with all tutors tutoring on the module was mainly via an online forum. Pat, a senior academic and member of the Faculty administration, also based centrally at Milton Keynes, was partly responsible for setting parameters within which those from the other two participant groups, tutors and students, operated, such as designing feedback processes in relation to tutor contracts and their paid time. The varied nature of the roles of these central academics means that parity of presentation of findings with the preceding two chapters is complicated, as institutional roles were not uniform; basically, tutors tutored and students studied but the job descriptions of the central academics differed considerably ([Table 4.5](#)). As a consequence, perhaps, interviews tended to be more



discursive than those with the other two participant group members and led by what was important to the individual interviewees within the context of their respective roles.

As with Chapter 6, evidence cited originates from interview transcripts, unless otherwise stated. As explained (7.1 and 4.7), pseudonyms for these interviewees are not gender specific and so are repeated, replacing personal pronouns, to protect identities.

## **7.3 Exploring institutional perspectives around feedback practices using a Bakhtinian-informed heuristic**

### **7.3.1 Language and communication as dialogic: *To what extent is the interaction that exists around feedback practices dialogic (in Bakhtinian terms)?***

Central academics (and tutors) were asked specific open questions within interviews about their views concerning tutor-student interaction around feedback on student writing (*Appendix 5.2*). However, Sam, Regional (line) manager, in response to interview questions, neither mentioned ‘dialogue’ nor alluded to feedback as two-way communication, responding to my specific question about issues over dialogue regarding academic writing by picking up the latter as more salient: “I think we don’t have a clear understanding of what exactly academic writing is.” Whilst there is, then, no evidence to explain Sam’s views about student-tutor interaction around feedback

practices, it seems that this issue was not a salient one for Sam. Therefore, the following discussion focuses on the views of Alex and Pat.

For Alex and Pat, the issues surrounding dialogue were underpinned by the additional constriction of managing tutor-student contracted time. Alex, an academic based centrally and senior module team member, explained:

“It’s great to have an in-depth dialogue with each student but that’s not necessarily going to be realistic or reasonable for the tutors.”

Alex here is concerned with the context, rather than the nature, of dialogue. Alex focused on “a balance to be struck” and that whilst tutors tended to include a comment within written feedback: “‘contact me if you want to discuss further’”, Alex urged caution and perhaps control, as: “some students will email back and forth endlessly, if encouraged to do so.” Alex considered the “notion of dialogue” as “a really good thing and incredibly helpful for students” but was concerned,

“that tutors can end up spending hours with one student, which is detrimental to the group as a whole but also unfair on the tutor because they only have a certain number of hours per week.”

The issue of tutor time was discussed in 6.3.3.2, both in relation to a material influential voice from tutors’ wider lives impacting feedback practices and in respect of an institutional voice, concerning what is expected and valued in feedback practices in relation to tutors’ paid time. Such balancing between what is expected of tutors and their paid, contracted time is a main factor in Alex’s concern for “equity”, discussed further below.

Alex suggested (questionnaire) that the online forum was helpful in offering all students equal tutor time but, in response to the question about ideal medium for dialogue, responded: "I'd say face-to-face. In fact, if you mean 'ideally', we'd be able to provide this support in any way the student wishes" adding, "This would mean considerable investment 😊" (questionnaire). Hence, Alex concluded that tutors needed to choose their "battles" (which I interpret as priorities to address). Alex commented that the "best tutors" do so by selecting "the most important areas, good or bad" and then inviting further discussion, if wanted.

Pat addressed the issue of the nature, expectations and feasibility of dialogue around feedback practices more explicitly and directly than did Alex: "I think the major issue is the extent to which there is a dialogue in the first place." This questioning of the existence of dialogue led Pat to outline a concept of "genuine" dialogue as ideal, whereas, for Alex, ideal dialogue comprised unlimited support of students' academic progress towards institutionally-valued goals, to "support any way the student wishes", as reported and discussed above. Pat's suggested view of "genuine" or "successful" dialogue was one within which students could say "Well, actually, I disagree with that", without being obliged to take on board "every bit of feedback". Pat asserted that academic writing is not "just responding to everything somebody in a position of power tells you to do".

Pat referred to "power issues", in relation to possibilities for "genuine" dialogue, which Pat stated might

"obviate successful dialogue and...if you are a beginning academic...and you have somebody [a tutor] who is very skilled in providing grounded feedback, based on evidence and he knows the field well, it can be very

difficult [for a student] to come back with a counter-argument or a refinement.”

Pat compared the situation of a student receiving feedback with Pat’s personal experience of submitting an article for publication:

“if I don’t feel that I’m in a genuine dialogue, then I’ll just do what people tell me in order to get the publication or I’ll do what people tell me to get the grade because...who actually other than the person providing the feedback is going to read my essay?”

Pat seems to be suggesting here that lack of “genuine dialogue”, that is one prevented from engaging in “counter argument”, so without an opportunity to respond, to answer back, leads to a narrow focus on meeting institutionally-valued expectations for a summative grade. Pat considered that the specified formal written tutor feedback “exacerbated” a “one-way approach” and, moreover, that even in a face-to-face

“supervision seminar...I don’t think it would be a fair argument to say that the people on the receiving end of the feedback feel that they are engaged in an academic dialogue”.

Pat’s use of “supervision” here, rather than the usual term for undergraduate tutor-student meetings, ‘tutorial’, tends to suggest a postgraduate context. In keeping with Pat’s other examples; Pat’s choice of language here and its associations suggest an approach distanced from the undergraduate context, which was the focus of the interview discussion. Pat suggested more “genuine” dialogue might be constructed by moving towards telephone feedback which could then be recorded. My interpretation here is that the purpose of the recorded feedback would be both to replace the formal

written record currently provided by tutors for student, tutor and institutional future reference (the latter for record keeping and in the event of a student complaint or appeal.) Pat then clarified that this would need to replace, rather than supplement, other current forms of feedback practices, due to tutors' contracted time constraints.

Further, Pat argued "dialogic difficulties" were "exacerbated" by the "feedback loop being distant", alluding to the distance learning University context. Pat's use of "dialogic" seems to equate with Pat's concept of "genuine" dialogue and appears to align with the Bakhtinian notion of dialogue (Bakhtin [1934/35], 1981:269), encouraging challenge of the inherent power of the tutor in the feedback process, indicating an ongoing dialogue with mutual participation and constant search for meaning (3.2/3.3.2).

However, Pat's comments appear to confirm that the assessment context limited possibilities for such "dialogic" discussion, although Pat also seems to be suggesting that dialogic discussion could be devised and constructed through institutionally-managed reorganisation of feedback processes, using recorded telephone feedback.

Turning to official documentation, contrary to Pat's view, the institution's *Monitoring Handbook* (The Open University, 2011b) seems to assume that the written (electronic) feedback itself is dialogue. Monitors are asked to "encourage tutors to aim for a **conversational** tone that builds a **dialogue** with their students" (my emphasis) (page 8). Whilst the *Monitoring Handbook* alludes to the possibility of communication beyond the prescribed formal written feedback, the nature of such communication is not specified:

“Remember that the [feedback] comments are only one way in which [tutors] communicate with their students. [Assignments] may also be discussed in ‘phone or online tutorials or via email” (page 8).

The institutional view of dialogue encoded in official documentation is broad in terms of medium and seen as a channel of communication to communicate with students, allowing for some tutor agency in terms of the amount, besides the medium, of communication. No reference is made to the constriction of tutors’ paid time evident within Alex’s and Pat’s responses.

### 7.3.2 Authoritative voice and internally persuasive discourse: *To what extent are particular voices perceived as authoritative and what evidence is there of the development of internally persuasive discourse?*

In this section, I explore the perceptions of authoritative voices and their counterpart in Bakhtinian terms, internally persuasive discourses, around feedback practices on assessed writing from the perspectives of central academics, representing the institution. I begin by considering the perspectives of central academics around their potential positions within the feedback/assessment hierarchy as an inherent ‘top down’ authority, due to their power to hire and monitor tutors, prescribe the framework within which tutors and students operate and award qualifications (Figure 1.1). I also explore the extent of the encoded authoritative voice within extracts from official documentation (introduced in 1.2.2 and 4.5.3).

Sam, responsible for the local appointment and appraisal of tutors and student-tutor relationships, such as dealing with a student complaint or request for regrading or

reallocation to another tutor, expressed unequivocal authoritative opinions in relation to my questions about the roles of participants within the feedback process, the nature of academic writing, effective feedback, its goals and formal measurement of its quality and regarding other influences on student writing outside the tutor-student relationship.

Sam's language choices appeared particularly authoritative in their relation to students, through use of categoric modals (Angelil-Carter and Murray, 2006:20-5), usually prefaced with an emphatic "I think"<sup>29</sup>: "I think what we have to do is"; "I think that...we should be saying to students, 'This is how to write'"; "We've got to train people". Sam's use of "we" appears to refer to the University as a body and to include tutors, "what we do with our students". Sam seemed to adopt a supportive position towards tutors, "I will say to tutors: 'You are doing a good job'."

Sam, like tutors Vera, Cath and John, tended to generalise about student experience, categorising students into types, such as when commenting on whether/how students read tutor feedback:

"moving down the continuum, there are students who realise they  
[feedback comments] exist but are too fearful to read them".

However, when asked about a preferred context for development of feedback (questionnaire), Sam indicated a belief that teaching should respond to individual requirements: "this [the type of teaching devised] depends on the people involved and their sensitivity to what is needed" and within interview, Sam described tutor feedback as "a highly subjective process", here acknowledging tutor agency. Sam valued what

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<sup>29</sup> Underlining signifies emphasis here as explained in 4.6.3.1.

Sam referred to as evidence-based feedback, that is, the type of feedback provided based on research evidence about what is helpful, citing a mini-research project Sam had recently undertaken, where students indicated “feed forward, not feed back” as most useful, meaning that feedback should relate to future assessments. This emphasis on feeding forward suggests a monologic focus on telling students how to meet institutionally-valued end goals.

A theme of Alex’s discourse, is “equity”, as mentioned (7.3.1), indicating that the rationale for Alex’s authoritative voice was primarily for the fair management of the day-to-day running of the module, including tutor-student relationships such as complaints referred by the Regional Manager (see above) or tutor concerns about a student’s academic welfare, within constraints, as discussed in 7.2. Alex arbitrated tutor-student disputes, and, like Sam, was supportive of tutors, reporting feeling “pleased” when there were student appeals which indicated lack of “respect” for tutors, as in Alex’s management role “it gives me an opportunity to support the tutor”. Alex mentioned “respect” in relation to tutors repeatedly, as evidenced below. Alex expressed concern (questionnaire) that “unreasonable expectations” of tutors could have a “severe impact” on formal end-of-module feedback from students. Alex was the only central academic participant to acknowledge the effect of the end-of-module student comments about tutors, which featured so prominently in tutor Andrew’s interview, in particular (see 6.3.2). Alex suggested that “lack of respect for tutors and their feedback”, in that the tutor was not treated as “expert”, resulted when students were uninterested in subject content and “just want to get through”. Alex qualified that such lack of respect, often evidenced within a student complaint, applied to “not very many” students and that students were generally both interested in the subject and in



“upping their grades for the next time”. Alex, then, recognised students’ differing reasons for study, perhaps influencing the ways they engage with feedback, which were evident in student data (5.3.3).

Pat, like Alex, acknowledged the need to deal with the realities and constraints of the contexts within which Pat and central academics generally operated, in order to achieve what they perceived as the valued outcomes. Unlike Sam, then, Pat and Alex alluded to compromise, whilst discussing similar issues, regarding participants’ roles in the feedback process, academic writing, what comprised effective feedback and the monitoring of feedback quality.

However, whilst Alex’s interview responses suggest Alex’s own personal involvement, when navigating tensions of everyday reality and tutor-student relationships, Pat’s replies indicate constrained authority, accompanied by either impersonal, objective examples and analogies or ones that do not relate directly to the undergraduate context to which Pat referred. This suggests that Pat is distanced from the day-to-day management involvement in the module, as experienced by Alex.

Pat, then, foregrounded, similar economic and practical constraints as did Alex, but from a different, more distant perspective. Whilst Alex, as module team member, became involved personally in negotiating tensions within the system as it existed, such as student-tutor disputes, Pat seemed distanced as a senior academic member of the Faculty’s administration. When describing an ideal tutor-student relationship regarding feedback, Pat explained: “The problem from my perspective is [tutors] are paid a certain amount to do certain things”, a comment that relates to the above discussion of concerns about the constraints of tutors’ paid and contracted time.

Overall, Sam seemed directive, categorical and supportive of tutors. Alex managed the day-to-day student-tutor relationships within economic constraints and with a focus on “equity” and “balance”. Pat appeared to maintain a more distanced, overall control of the management of the system within which feedback processes played a major part.

These three different approaches from these three central academics – directive and supportive; fairness and balance in the face of day-to-day realities; distanced control – manifest themselves again in these three central academics’ approaches to the monitoring of tutors’ feedback.

Sam, the Regional Manager, was supportive of tutors whilst directly critical of the monitoring practices of the institution. Monitoring of tutor feedback seems to be perceived by Sam as authority from the module team (represented by central academic, Alex) with no reference to tutors John and Alice’s perceptions of monitoring as peer feedback (6.2). Sam criticised the authority of monitoring for being “subjective” and not derived from “grounded evidence-based practice”, commenting that there was “complete lack of consistency within modules and across modules as to what good feedback feels like”, a view resonating with that of tutor, Vera. Sam’s examples of monitor inconsistency included different views on personal pronoun usage, the extent to which there are references to marking criteria “determined by the course team” and details around the presentation of feedback, “whether you put it on a continuation sheet”. Sam cited the experience of a particular tutor on two modules:

“on one module what he does is regarded as best practice and he gets ‘Excellent’ and on the other module where he perceives that he is doing exactly the same thing and...I would perceive the same, he is getting ‘Scope for improvement’.”

Alex, however, did not seem to view the purpose of monitoring to criticise individual tutors. Both Alex's supportive approach and theme of "balance" and "equity" appear reflected in Alex's account of monitoring tutor feedback, presented as overall quality control of the feedback process, ensuring fairness to all students and tutors. Alex cited an example of "a lot of 'cut and pasting' going on" (by tutors), which Alex would point out (to tutors): "because each student is also entitled to individual feedback".

Pat seemed to view monitoring of tutor feedback practices as an authoritative management tool, with no suggestion of a peer feedback role, or as quality control for fairness. Pat considered monitoring as a particularly important hierarchical process. Pat raised this issue in interview, indicating Pat's concern about its significance: "we haven't talked about monitoring". Pat emphasised that monitoring was "a critical part of what we do". Pat described a parallel between tutor authority over students regarding assessment and the monitors' authority over tutors regarding assignment feedback. Pat suggested that I ask tutors what they take on board from their monitors' feedback, in addition to asking students about tutor feedback:

"so the same principles apply, I think, about what's being said at the higher level, what I am being beaten up over, what I need to do."

Pat, then, saw a clear hierarchy, the institutional authority over tutors being realised in the monitoring of their feedback and tutors' authority over students evident through grading, imposing institutionally-valued expectations within feedback on their assessed writing.

Turning to a consideration of the extent of authoritative voices encoded with extracts from official documentation, monitoring guidelines are set out in a University document

(*Monitoring Handbook*, [The Open University, 2011b]). This seems much in line with Pat's view of monitoring as evaluative of individual tutor's feedback practices and authoritative management tool. Its categorical language instructs monitors unequivocally in an authoritative role:

"Your task **is** to monitor [tutors] with varying degrees of experience...Your role **is** to identify and confirm good practice **or point out** any gaps in the feedback" (my emphasis) (page 8).

There is no hedging, leaving little doubt that this is an instruction manual: "You are **required** to judge" (my emphasis) (page 7); there is much use of the modal of obligation, "**should**", referring to both the monitor's ascribed role: "You **should** comment on the appropriateness of the marks given" (page 7) and to what is expected of the monitored tutor: "Comments **should be** relevant and unambiguous" (my emphasis) (page 6). Acknowledgement is made of the variance in student population, such as according to age range and "sensitivities" (page 9), for example, without countenancing variation in tutor feedback and marking, rather, to ensure that the tutors encourage: "They should refrain from being too judgemental". Some limited flexibility is permitted, according to, for instance, students' personal circumstances they have shared with their tutors (page 8). Monitors are instructed to provide feedback comments that are:

"constructive and supportive and written in such a way to affirm the positive aspects as well as point out areas for development" (page 9).

Some permissions and options are offered to the monitor: "You **may** wish" and the suggestion that monitors "**may** like to make reference to" (my emphasis) previous

monitoring advice (page 7). The prescriptiveness of these categorical directives affects both tutors and students in the feedback process and appears to resonate with Pat's paralleling of the student-tutor and tutor-monitor experiences.

The *Assessment Handbook* (The Open University, 2012b), a generic University document, is again authoritative, in relation to students and indirectly to tutors with regard to parameters for their feedback and summative grading. It uses categorical modality, which Angelil-Carter and Murray (2006:21) describe as, "an indication of the power relationship at work". The extract analysed contains rules about assignment submission dates, when instructions do, arguably, need to be definitive, such as regarding extensions to assessment submission deadlines: "You **must obtain** permission through the Learner Support Team" (my emphasis). However, a politeness strategy is used (lacking from the *Monitoring Handbook*): "Please remember" and a bullet-pointed list comprises a series of ways in which permission may be given for late submission, with phrasing allowing room for individual decision-making: "If you decide not to", "If you want permission", "If you want to submit", "If you think", seemingly like options for customers in the light of increasing student fees for tuition (as discussed in 1.2.2 and mentioned by Alex, above). There is then the reminder of ultimate institutional authority: "late submission is not a right".

The sample assignment task for the studied module, provided in the examples of institutional documentation (*Appendix 10.1*), was set by central academics in the module team, addressed to students, with tutors as indirect addressees, to inform/guide their tutoring and feedback. Its style is polite: "Please make sure you have read through the guidance" but impersonal, using the passive "examples are to be found" with the task itself presented as the authority: "This essay-based assignment requires you", "The

aim of this assignment is” and it is the materials, rather than their authors, that “introduce concepts”. It is informative about the location of resources and focused on instructions to achieve a specific task.

The Marking Criteria/Grid, shared between tutors and students in this studied module and included within examples of official documentation (*Appendix 10.2*), is similarly directive and authoritative towards students, here regarding what is valued for levels of achievement. However, language is relative, not absolute, allowing some interpretation, and hence tutor agency, perhaps what tutor, Vera, subsumed under lack of “standardization” (6.3.2). For example, the grading criterion for ‘Knowledge and Understanding of [module] material’ identifies work at the eight levels from distinction<sup>30</sup> to ‘bad fail’ with the following relative values: “excellent”, “good”, “generally competent”, “basic”, “weak”, “little” and “irrelevant”.

Overall, Alex’s and Pat’s inherent (due to their management roles) authoritative voices were tempered by the need to “balance” (Alex) the reality of the constraints of day-to-day pressures around feedback practices with tutors’ paid contracted time, Pat taking a more distanced and hierarchical approach. These approaches were reflected in their stances towards the monitoring of tutor feedback, for example, as overall quality control for fairness (Alex) and what tutors are “being beaten up over” (Pat). Sam expressed categorical opinions about the roles of participants in the feedback process. Official documentation appears authoritative regarding tutor feedback practices concerning expectations of students, for example, but still with some room for interpretation and appropriation.

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<sup>30</sup> Termed ‘Pass 1’

### 7.3.3 Heteroglossia: *Are there a range of voices that influence participants' perspectives around feedback practices?*

I operationalise Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia ([1934/35], 1981:291 and see 3.3.4) to explore the range of potential voices on central academics' perspectives around feedback practices, central academics representing institutional perspectives. Firstly, I explore the range of influential voices from beyond the University context. Secondly, I consider evidence of central academics' recognition of influential voices on other participant groups in the feedback process – tutors and students. Finally, I, again, discuss underpinning awareness of discourses around and approaches towards academic writing in a separate section.

Whilst glimpses of personal influences from outside the University context on feedback practices and perspectives were minimal, those that were evident seemed strong in terms of influencing current approaches, as with some students and tutors. Sam referred directly to personal past experience of doctoral study with a supervisor, “who believed it was his moral duty to teach me to write”; “duty” is a discourse or voice that is echoed in Sam's comments about the teaching of writing alongside subject content, “we are duty bound to teach things about writing”.

Alex focused on the current institutional context and Alex's experiences beyond this did not appear in Alex's discourse, whereas evidence of Pat's personal experience of academia seemed strong, especially in Pat's analogies with the student experience. When advocating feeding forward to the next assignment for tutors, Pat's examples were stages of a postgraduate thesis:

“somebody might submit an outline for a proposal, you get feedback on it...so now I’m going to submit my literature review, which is based on the feedback.”

Pat further paralleled an assumed goal-directed approach that Pat perceived amongst undergraduates with that of an experienced academic, seeking publication:

“To what extent am I interested in the dialogue or to what extent am I interested in, ‘Oh, OK, if I make these changes to my journal paper, it gets published’?”

Evidence of recognition by central academics of outside influential voices on tutors’ feedback practices centre on time, in relation to Alex’s and Pat’s concern to balance tutors’ paid time, their “six to eight hours a week” (Alex) per module with expectations around feedback practices, discussed in Chapter 6. Sam also alludes to this balance between tutor contracted time and expectations briefly, when explaining difficulties with following a feedback practice piloted in another faculty: “there’s issues about time; there’s issues about cost”.

Comments with regard to acknowledgement of influential voices on students around feedback practices concerned their reasons for study, advice from other persons aside from their tutors and social media.

Of particular interest here is Pat’s apparent unequivocal view that students are motivated primarily by summative grade. Pat was categorical in this respect in relation to the context of tutor feedback for students:

“actually what the most important thing to come out of this is essentially the grade. And that’s what counts...students by and large don’t come to



University to become academics...They come to get a degree or a qualification. We as academics might say, 'No, they should be coming to engage in this bigger world of literature and ideas.' But actually it's not for most students."

Pat's perception here separates central academics and tutors, "**We** are academics" (my emphasis) from students. The assumption is categorical that students are narrowly and single-mindedly in pursuit of a qualification and uninterested in the "bigger world" academia has to offer. This belief about students' focus on the outcome is illustrated also by Pat's analogy, above, of Pat's focus on getting an academic article published. Pat's approach here has implications for management decisions around feedback practices with a focus being on institutionally-valued criteria.

Whilst perceptions of (and attitudes towards) outside influences on students, such as family and social media, were acknowledged only minimally by students and tutors (5.3; 6.3), responses from central academics varied considerably in this respect.

Sam indicated that voices outside the feedback and writing process were influential on students and that advice to students from others was "helpful" only if from a "reliable source" (questionnaire), which Sam defined as someone with a degree or "who is a writer" but specified that

"if they are getting advice from their mother, who hasn't got a degree...then their advice is probably not going to be helpful".<sup>31</sup>

Sam, in a similar way to Pat (above), seems to be making assumptions about whose voices might be relevant in academia. Sam declared no specific opinions about

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<sup>31</sup> I did not pursue examples within interview.

Facebook/social media. Whilst mentioning Facebook as not always providing “good advice”, Sam did not condemn the use of social media

“it’s helpful when it’s helpful...Facebook is like a fork or a pen it has not innate qualities....It can be useful.”

Alex responded immediately to my question about any influences surrounding feedback practices from ‘outside’ sources by commenting on an unhelpful influence from social media, namely Facebook, in fuelling anxiety about assessment: “because the pull of places like Facebook is so strong”. Alex, like tutor Cath, alluded to the limitation of power of the institutional role in this respect “because we’re not there...to set them straight”, continuing: “I think what often happens that they are on social media sites and things go wrong”. My assumption here from my ‘insider’ perspective (and from tutor Cath’s interview comments [6.3]) was that Alex referred to rumours concerning interpretations of assessment instructions which contradicted a tutor’s advice. Alex concluded:

“I do think it’s a problem and I wish if they had a question...or there was a misunderstanding...somebody would talk to the tutor or the course team so that we can put them straight. But I can’t help it if it’s all rumours and things go on Facebook.”

Alex foregrounded Facebook as a specific influence four times without prompting from myself as interviewer.

Alex’s immediate and definite response contrasted with Pat’s answer to my same question about advice from other sources: “I wouldn’t know. I haven’t got evidence”. Emphasis on “evidence” was a theme of Pat’s interview, as were responses confined to

the sphere of influence in which Pat operated, seemingly devoid of the personal day-to-day involvement, evident within Sam's and Alex's discourse.

#### 7.3.3.1 Voices influencing perspectives on academic writing (Ivanič, 2004)

Central academic participants' perspectives on writing in an academic context were explored according to Ivanič's (2004:225) six discourses (*Appendix 11*). As with students and tutors (see Tables 5.3 and 6.1), evidence of particular discourses around writing are indicated in Table 7.1. Full responses from central academics to the academic writing interview question are appended (*Appendix 12.5*).

Table 7.1: Evidence of awareness of discourses around academic writing (Ivanič [2004:225]):  
central academics

SAMPLE	SKILLS DISCOURSE	CREATIVITY DISCOURSE	PROCESS DISCOURSE	GENRE DISCOURSE	SOCIAL PRACTICES DISCOURSE	SOCIO-POLITICAL DISCOURSE
<b>SAM</b> Regional Manager	<b>YES EVIDENCE</b> Comments on the text as product and suggests academic writing is context-free.	<b>NO EVIDENCE</b>	<b>YES EVIDENCE</b> Talks of students needing to be taught to draft and edit	<b>YES EVIDENCE</b> Indicates social purpose of writing “students are expected to mimic the writing of seasoned academics” “we have to have a shared understanding of what we mean by academic writing”	<b>YES EVIDENCE</b> Talks of importance of writing within a social context	<b>YES EVIDENCE</b> Talks of writing as means to “demonstrate that what you have read has changed your world view” Refers to “level of criticality” (although unclear what is meant by this)
<b>ALEX</b> Central academic, module team	<b>YES EVIDENCE</b> Talks of problems involving “grammar and spelling”	<b>NO EVIDENCE</b>	<b>NO EVIDENCE</b>	<b>YES EVIDENCE</b> Indicates “discipline specific” nature of writing	<b>YES EVIDENCE</b> Indicates social purpose of writing as meeting (valued) expectations	<b>YES EVIDENCE</b> Talks of writing as involving evidence of critical thinking
<b>PAT</b> Faculty senior academic	<b>NO EVIDENCE</b>	<b>NO EVIDENCE</b>	<b>YES EVIDENCE</b> Indicates importance of thinking and writing “It’s about answering a question, collecting evidence and testing that evidence out”	<b>YES EVIDENCE</b> Talks of academic writing as involving a “set of academic conventions”	<b>YES EVIDENCE</b> Indicates social purpose of writing “putting it in such a way that other people can see the thinking behind your argument”	<b>YES EVIDENCE</b> Power relationships between tutor-student are an interview theme (but in relation to the context, not the content, of writing)

While there are traces of most of the six discourses, across the three central academics there was particularly strong evidence of orientation to writing from both a genre and a social practices approach. Sam’s theme of the “duty” of training students to write

academically appears to represent a view of academic writing as context-free, even discipline-free. Such training, Sam declared, should be via the use of models and that “the best models” are edited chapters from published academic writing within course readers “written to the criteria of academic writing, otherwise it wouldn’t have been published.” Sam argued that students are misled into believing that academic writing comprises complex language, whereas:

“It’s about expressing yourself simply...but in a way that is different to a novel or different to other writing that you might engage with.”

Sam explained that students are partly misguided because the examples of writing they have, like tutor notes and handouts and some module materials, “are clearly not academic writing”.

Sam appeared dismissive of focusing criticism on isolated linguistic skills and academic conventions, like referencing, in favour of academic writing as expression of individual experience:

“I have far too many conversations with fellow academics about referencing which I don’t think is the point. I have far too many conversations with fellow academics about whether the personal pronoun is appropriate or not. And I don’t think that is the point. I think the point of academic writing is to demonstrate something...you have read and that what you have read has changed your world view...and that level of criticality is something that’s very hard to understand...the only way that I could show someone what is criticality is by giving someone an example of it.”

Sam's views expressed here seem to be reflected in Sam's approach to the management of tutor-student relationships surrounding feedback practices and are also likely to have implications for other aspects of Sam's role in relation to tutor feedback, such as observer of advice given at face-to-face tutorials, within which discussions around institutionally-valued expectations within feedback and grading occur.

There is some evidence of a social practices discourse (seeing writing as an event within a social context) and of a socio-political discourse (recognising the ideologically motivated construction of texts) within Sam's comments. Sam rejected a focus on isolated skills as "jumping through hoops" but, rather, explained

"what I want to do is to engage with their thought process through writing...I think it's a kind of whole brain, whole body, whole concept".

Sam's orientations to academic writing seemed to suggest a process approach (focusing on the practical composition of texts), wanting to move away from relying on criteria and towards working on student drafts within tutorials. Whilst we did not discuss how this teaching method would relate to feedback, Sam explained that a problem with the feedback system was that

"you do an assignment and then you move on to the next one. There's no going back and editing."

Sam provided no examples of possible changes to the system that might replace this problematic linear practice.

Unlike Sam, Alex did not refer to models or published works; rather, Alex's definition of academic writing: "an appropriate approach, responding to the task set" focused, as with Alex's other responses, on the institutional context, explaining that:

“expectations in each discipline...[are] possibly task specific, because we set tasks that require a different kind of response...It is really broad”.

Alex’s comments above suggest that a concept of a genre approach seems to be context and discipline specific. Additionally, Alex listed a range of more general, rather than discipline-specific, potential problems with students’ academic writing, including grammar, spelling, argument construction and evidence of critical thinking, so necessitating tutors to “strike a balance” within feedback between over-correcting and saying “everything’s OK”, again maintaining the theme of balance and equity present throughout Alex’s discourse.

Pat’s orientation to academic writing seemed to suggest both a process and genre approach, although Pat’s general definition of academic writing might be argued to lean towards experienced academics and seems far from Sam’s teaching model or Alex’s list of a range of problems that might be encountered by tutor markers. Pat explained:

“it’s about answering a question, collecting evidence, testing that evidence out and putting it in a way that other people can see your thinking behind your argument”.

The latter comment, to “put in a way that other people can see your thinking” suggests a social practices approach, conscious of writing in a particular social context within which certain text types are valued. Whilst the power relations between tutor and student are an interview theme of Pat’s, this appears to be in relation to the context, rather than the content of students’ assessed writing.

## 7.4 Summary

This chapter focused on my third research question, *What are the institution's perspectives around feedback practices on assessed writing?* I began with a summary of the data collected regarding institutional perspectives around feedback practices on assessed writing (7.1). Institutional perspectives were represented by central academics and brief extracts from official documentation. I then introduced the three central academic interviewees, focusing on their varied roles within the University context (7.2). I explored institutional data both through a realist and an interpretivist lens (7.3), the interpretivist lens being derived from the three Bakhtinian notions outlined in Chapter 3, considering language and communication as dialogic (7.3.1), as involving authoritative voice and internally persuasive discourse (7.3.2), and heteroglossia (7.3.3). I again posed the key related questions (see [Table 3.1](#)).

In answering the question - *What are the institution's perspectives around feedback practices on assessed writing?* – from a realist lens, the following points emerge in this chapter.

- **The overriding concern of central academics with regard to feedback practices was that of the need for balance between tutor contracted time and expectations of student-tutor interaction.**
- **The two central academics who were involved in the day-to-day management of tutor-student relationships were supportive of tutors in their relationship with students. Tutors were perceived as experts.**
- **Different perspectives around feedback practices were evident between the three central academics, relating to their different professional roles.**



In exploring the same question – *What are the institution's perspectives around feedback practices on assessed writing?* - through an interpretivist lens, focusing on language and communication as dialogic, involving authoritative voice and internally persuasive discourse, and heteroglossia and responding to the questions posed in Chapter 3 ([Table 3.1](#)), the following points emerge as significant.

- *To what extent is the interaction that exists around feedback practices dialogic (in Bakhtinian terms)?* **The interaction that exists around feedback practices was not described by central academics as dialogic**, due primarily to the overriding concerns and constraints of the smooth running of the feedback system and the limits of contracted paid tutor time. Indeed, Pat questioned the possibility of dialogue in feedback practices due to “power issues”, “exacerbated” by the distance learning context. Pat was the only participant to refer specifically to “dialogic” student-tutor interaction around feedback practices. which Pat equated with “genuine” student-tutor dialogue, where a student could present an alternative voice to the tutor: “I disagree with that”. Alex’s concept of “ideal” dialogue was of providing “support” “in any way that the student wishes” (Alex). Alex’s reference to “support” might suggest a monologic/dialectic purpose, which is evidenced further by Alex’s compromise advice that tutors should select “the most important areas [in providing feedback] good or bad”.
- *To what extent are particular voices perceived as authoritative and what evidence is there of the development of internally persuasive discourse?*

**Inherent authoritative voices (related to management roles) were**

**tempered due to the need to balance the reality** of the constraints of tutors' contracted paid time, when "tutors only have certain numbers of hours a week" (Alex) which seemed to influence central academics' own agency to affect changes to feedback processes. Pat took a distanced authoritative approach: "The problem from my perspective is [tutors] are paid a certain amount to do certain things" and a hierarchical authority was evident particularly in Pat's concept of monitoring of tutor feedback practices as what tutors are "being beaten up over". Sam expressed categorical opinions about the roles of participants in the feedback process. Official documentation appeared authoritative regarding tutor feedback practices, concerning expectations of students, for example, but still with some room for interpretation and appropriation. Alex and Sam's discourse was more one of supporting tutors as trusted experts than of monologic authority.

- *Are there a range of voices that influence participants' perspectives around feedback practices?* **Voices influencing approaches to feedback from experiences beyond the University context, discourse and ideas were evident.** Sam's approach to the teaching of writing was influenced by a doctoral supervisor who had thought this his moral "duty" and Pat's analogies of the feedback process alluded to Pat's own of publishing an article, which evidenced a more distanced stance from the undergraduate one studied in this research. A genre orientation was again evident towards academic writing, although each central academic viewed this differently, from a definite and shared understanding (Sam), to context-dependent on the task (Alex) and to a guide for novice academics (Pat). In relation to perceptions of voices influencing other participants in the feedback process,

Pat's conviction that students are primarily motivated by the summative grade "the most important thing to come out of this" contradicts student data (5.2; Figures 5.1 and 5.2). Alex expressed much concern about the influence of social media around feedback practices, seemingly as an alternative or competing voice challenging tutors' voices, rather than social/academic peer support.

The next chapter concludes this exploration and discusses findings around feedback practices from all three key perspectives.

# **CHAPTER 8**

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION:**

### **MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES AROUND FEEDBACK PRACTICES**

#### **8.1 Introduction**

This final chapter draws together the findings from the three key perspectives in relation to feedback practices on assessed writing in HE. As with the previous chapters (5-7), I use the Bakhtinian heuristic as the overarching framework. I begin by discussing findings and insights drawn from data analysis (8.2) and emphasise the existence of multiple perspectives within and across the three participant groups (8.2.1). I discuss the issue of time as a specific material and discursive phenomena of particular significance regarding tutors' orientations to feedback (8.2.2). I then evaluate the application of the overarching Bakhtinian heuristic to my study (8.3.3). I consider the pedagogical and professional implications arising from the thesis (8.3), drawing on both realist (8.3.1) and interpretivist understandings (8.3.2). I then reflect on the limitations of my study (8.4), leading to suggestions for future research (8.5). I finish with a closing reflection on my experience of writing this thesis (8.6).

## 8.2 Exploring perspectives around feedback practices using a Bakhtinian-informed heuristic

My research journey involved me in seeking out a theoretical framework that would enable me to explore the range of perspectives in the feedback process on assessed writing in greater depth. In particular, I searched for a way to consider more deeply the interpretations of the concept of ‘dialogue’, discussed in the literature as both desirable but lacking within feedback practices (see 2.5). This led me to the works of Bakhtin and, as my interest in Bakhtinian notions developed and deepened alongside my research, to seek a Bakhtinian heuristic, an interpretivist framework against which I could consider participants’ perspectives non-judgementally, so standing back from my insider perspective. Three Bakhtinian categories emerged: language and communication as dialogic; authoritative voice and internally persuasive discourse; heteroglossia. This Bakhtinian interpretivist framework is discussed in Chapter 3 and summarised in [Table 3.1](#); the related questions introduced in Chapter 3 are addressed throughout the data analysis chapters (5-7) and form the basis of the discussion below.

### 8.2.1 Language and communication as dialogic: To what extent is the interaction that exists around feedback practices dialogic (in Bakhtinian terms)?

What initially seems to dominate from the findings with all three participant groups is an apparently monologic, in Bakhtinian terms, orientation to feedback practices. Most student questionnaire respondents reported no discussion with a tutor following the

written formal feedback, which student interviewee, Mary, termed as “one-way”. The concern evidenced within questionnaire responses ([Table 5.1](#)) and by student interviewees, for example, was a desire to be clear about their tutor’s meaning (Julie), “what they’re asking me” (Tom), and about “what was expected” (Dawn). Clarity of institutionally-valued expectations seemed to be a key concern. Findings from my study resonate with Adams and McNab’s (2012), for example, which suggest significant correlation between communication of clear “demystified” (page 40) goals and standards and students’ overall satisfaction with feedback. Aside from clarification of such expectations, findings from my exploration of students’ perspectives suggest little desire for dialogue around feedback.

Amongst tutors, too, a monologic perspective is in evidence. Vera considers the written feedback to be “one-sided”, used to “just tell them [students] something” and Vera’s interview comments suggest that any dialogue with students is limited and tutor-controlled. Cath preferred email communication in order to maintain control of her responses to students and used categorical language about what she valued of which she had “a clear idea”; she referred to students’ “arrogance” in not heeding her criticisms. John expressed a desire to avoid confrontation with individual students, rather imparting information through the online tutor group forum and termed students who he perceived made errors in their writing “offending individuals”. A more dialectic rather than dialogic orientation to meaning making is suggested by tutor Vera’s reference to “scaffolding” and tutors’ frequent use of the term “constructive” to refer to guiding students towards particular institutionally-valued expectations, “without undermining them” (John) and by tutor Cath within a directive approach of “showing how things can be improved”. The academic convention of hedging criticism was perceived to obscure messages by tutor Alice, causing students to “miss” her “clearly”

made points, which might also be interpreted as a struggle between a monologic and dialogic approach.

The perspectives of the central academics regarding feedback appeared to be filtered through their differing management roles and the need to maintain the smooth operation of the feedback context; Sam and Alex foregrounded managing day-to-day student relationships, the overriding concern for Alex and Pat appeared to be working within the confines of budgetary constraints. Pat, operating from a more distanced authoritative position, seemed to visualise a dialogic ideal but a monologic reality around feedback practices. Alex presented an “ideal” of providing “support in any way the student wishes” as not feasible in view of limited tutor contracted time. Alex’s approach to compromise within this situation seems indicated by Alex’s comment that the “best tutor” will select the important issues “good or bad” to follow up written feedback, which suggests a dialectic orientation towards meaning making, of providing “support” towards a prescribed, institutional goal. The concern of central academic, Sam, also shared by tutor, Andrew, and highlighted in the literature (Hughes *et al*, 2015), was that feedback should feed forward to future assessments or to module assessment as a whole, maintaining focus on and synthesis towards institutionally-valued expectations and, as such, can also appear part of a dialectic/monologic approach.

Despite the apparent pull towards the monologic, led by constraints within the institutional system around feedback and the demands of summative grading, there is evidence in the comments from tutors and students of some desire for more dialogue in interaction around feedback practices. The search for mutual understanding between students and tutors, together with the perspective of the tutor as more “competent

other” (Steen-Utheim and Wittek, 2007:26) can be viewed as part of an attempt towards building an ongoing dialogic relationship. Student Julie, for example, was delighted with “really useful” but categoric and seemingly monologic feedback. She described it as “great” and appeared to interpret this as part of a dialogic relationship, in that she was able to use the apparently monologic feedback towards building her ‘internally persuasive discourse’. This was signalled by her comments “there’s no right way of doing it” and that she was pursuing her “own way”. Carl valued tutor feedback but liked to “fathom” and “scramble out” for himself the meanings of formal written tutor feedback. This type of engagement with and reappropriation of tutor feedback perhaps illustrates the ideal considered by Nicol *et al* (2014:103), where students “construct their own meaning” and, again, aligns with Bakhtin’s notion of ‘internally persuasive’ discourse ([1934/35],1981:270-2; 342).

Although tutors did seem to take a more monologic/dialectic approach, as indicated above, tutor Alice wanted to encourage challenge over issues of subject content, which she considered would be “stimulating” and constitute a “very interesting dialogue”.

The above suggests perspectives on dialogue around feedback practices that involve both monologic and dialogic dimensions. In particular, a dialogic relationship is possible and also desired by some student participants some of the time, as part of a process of appropriating the authoritative voice. This happens despite the apparent confines of current feedback and assessment practices. Evidence suggests that tutors tend towards more monologic approaches, premised on a dialectic orientation to textual meaning making, while also giving some encouragement towards dialogic interaction around subject content. From within the central academic participant group, Pat



signalled that a dialogic approach is ideal but acknowledged that it was not feasible within current institutional constraints.

Closely related to the findings regarding the Bakhtinian concept of monologic and dialogic interactions around feedback practices are the findings related to authoritative voice and internally persuasive discourse.

### 8.2.2 Authoritative voice and internally persuasive discourse: *To what extent are particular voices perceived as authoritative and what evidence is there of development of internally persuasive discourse?*

Again, perspectives differ both between and within groups. Apparent authoritative voices are perceived as more or less non-negotiable and suppressing an 'internally persuasive' counterpart (Bakhtin [1934/35], 1981:270-2;342). Perhaps the most obvious authoritative voice is the summative grade, included within tutors' feedback.

The summative grade, while clearly authoritative, might be expected to have less significance for students who are more concerned about their academic development or personal interest, rather than achievement on the module, such as Ben, whose reasons for study were as "a good way of using time in retirement" and to "expand my education and to widen my knowledge of the English language". However, even for these students, the summative grade is indicated as important, as it appears to be appropriated as a measure of their progress, the grade being an indicator of success. Julie, studying for "pleasure...not gain" when commenting on her improvement confirmed that she measured this "in terms of grades". The authority of the grade and of tutors' feedback advice are generally accepted by students, although there is both some positive and

occasional negative evaluation, such as Ben's comments about one tutor who "did a good job...was knowledgeable" and another with "a very old-fashioned approach".

Tutors' views towards the authoritative nature of their grading and feedback practices varied. All tutors perceived they have agency, "a lot of freedom" (Vera), regarding the assessment of students' writing, and agency is largely welcomed as allowing "tutors to form their own opinions about what's important" (John). John also reported using grading as an authoritative measure of control, so reducing marks when a student had not followed his previous feedback advice. Agency within grading was, however, disliked by Vera who wanted "standardisation" to avoid "impressionistic" marking, as did Alice for equity between students. For Vera, there seemed to be conflict in feedback provision which conflated the dialectic of "scaffolding" towards an institutionally-valued goal and the monologic allocation of an authoritative, non-negotiable grade:

"We are trying to give advice for them to get higher marks but at the same time we are judging."

Central academics did not seem to be regarded as direct authoritative voices for students or tutors, but the institution's authority was clearly channelled indirectly through documentation including the grading criteria. In terms of central academics' perspective of their own voice as authoritative, this was, again, filtered through their foregrounding of the institutional roles of maintaining the system, the student-tutor relationships (Sam and Alex) and within budgetary constraints (Alex and Pat), the "balance to be struck" (Alex), particularly with regard to tutors' paid contracted time. However, central academics did envisage that the authority of the institution was operationalised through the monitoring of tutors' feedback practices, perceived as a system of overall quality control and ensuring equity between students by Alex, as

directly managing individual tutor performance by Pat and as a centralised authoritative voice for regional central academic, Sam, who also criticised the quality and equity of this procedure, referring to “a complete lack of consensus”.

The *Monitoring Handbook* (The Open University, 2011b) uses categorical language concerning tutor-student feedback practices, with its frequent use of the modal of obligation, ‘should’ (see 7.3.2). Nevertheless, not all tutors perceived the monitoring of their feedback and grading as the imposition of an authoritative voice, but rather as an ongoing dialogue over their tutoring, which was welcomed by some as peer feedback. The idea of having insight into another tutor’s working methods seemed attractive: “it must be a wonderful thing...to have that overview of what other people are doing” (John). This perspective resonates with that of student Carl who wanted to see examples of other students’ high-achieving writing to find out “‘What did I miss?’” Such wanting to connect with others and to learn about the working practices of tutor or student peers is perhaps a feature of the relative isolation of the distance learning context and might also be considered as part of the interrelatedness, which Haynes (2013:125) considers the core of Bakhtin’s dialogism, as “profound interdependence with others”.

For tutors the most powerful authoritative voice, as indicated in [Figure 1.1](#), seems to be that of students, which in Andrew’s view could be “particularly...terrible”. Student criticism was viewed defensively: “I don’t want the students to say what a lousy tutor I was” (Alice); Vera provided extensive feedback comments to protect herself “from any negative feedback”. Tutors’ concern was particularly with the end of module student feedback on tutor practices. Alex is the only central academic who acknowledged the strong “impact” of this system on tutors.

Therefore, whilst the assumed authoritative voices in the hierarchy envisaged in [Figure 1.1](#) exist, they are appropriated and challenged to an extent by an internally persuasive counterpart. However, one authoritative voice seems particularly dominant and powerful for tutors, that of student criticism within their feedback on tutor performance.

### 8.2.3 Heteroglossia: Are there a range of voices that influence participants' perspectives around feedback practices?

A range of voices influencing participant's perspectives around their feedback practices and assessed writing were evident amongst all participant groups, such as prior educational and work experiences. These included student Ben's profession as an editor in a government department where clarity of message was crucial, tutor John's role as a dance competition judge, wishing to avoid personal confrontation through naming of "the individual" being criticised, and central academic Pat's allusion to getting a journal article published and so being focused on the outcome, as an analogy with students' focus on the summative grade within feedback.

Students generally seemed not to be influenced by other student voices as was illustrated by their reasons for wanting to attend face-to-face tutorials, that is, for tutor contact and guidance. Further, there was minimal use of social media acknowledged by students which might have afforded another means for student voices to influence each other. Tutors also perceived little influence from social media on feedback practices. However, central academic Alex considered social media as a significant voice, competing with that of tutors: "the pull of places like Facebook is so strong", indicating

an unhelpful alternative and often misleading voice to that of a student's tutor in reference to assignment tasks and feedback.

An important difference emerged regarding the influential voices of students' reasons for study. Reasons for study were shown to be an influence on students' approaches to feedback, many of whom were studying for personal development and for interest in the subject, not focused on the grade, aside from that being an indication of their progress, as discussed above. Moreover, module content was the only reason for study cited by 21 per cent of students surveyed ([Figure 5.3](#)) and 46 per cent included this as one of their reasons for registration on the module: "my main goal is to...understand the roots and the evolution of the English language" (questionnaire respondent). Therefore, central academic Pat's conviction that students studied only for a grade, "the most important thing to come out of this", evidently contradicted what was the case for many students.

In relation to influencing voices on feedback practices with regard to academic writing, a genre approach was common to all groups, seeing academic writing as text-types and conventions to be acquired and applied, which seemed to lead to expectations that feedback should provide specific guidance on institutionally-valued academic writing style and conventions. Student Phil spoke of learning how to "build an academic essay". There emerged a particular concern with feedback around referencing conventions, termed "pedantic" (Martin) and necessary but "bizarre" (Julie) and tutors Cath and John recounted efforts made within feedback to ensure students use appropriate referencing.

What is clear from this review of the three strands relating to the Bakhtinian heuristic is that perspectives around feedback practices cannot be neatly summarised and tied to

particular groups. Whilst a monologic orientation overall seems to prevail across the three, it is also the case that it might be more useful to talk of a monologic-dialogic continuum, rather than a straightforward binary distinction between monologic and dialogic. For example, Vera's struggle to reconcile the dialectic "giving advice for higher marks" and monologic "judging" in feedback (see 8.2.2 above) might be viewed as situated along a dialogic/monologic continuum. Within this continuum there are further conflicts, like Pat's dialogic ideal and perception of a monologic reality. Such conflict seems inevitable within the context of conflation of formative and summative assessment. Attempts to keep 'difference in play', such as around subject content (by student Phil and tutor Alice, for example) are in an ongoing conflict with the pressure to focus on an end-goal of a grade based on institutionally-valued criteria.

#### 8.2.4 Multiple perspectives

This section addresses my fourth research question: *To what extent are there multiple perspectives around feedback practices on assessed writing?*

I began my investigation with the intention of exploring three key perspectives around feedback practices on assessed writing, rather than foregrounding one perspective as seemed to be the case with many studies reviewed in Chapter 2. My study has shown the value of exploring these perspectives because doing so: informs a more complete understanding of processes and practices around feedback on assessed writing; attempts to ensure that any pedagogical recommendations take account of all participant groups affected; facilitates stepping aside from my insider position.

My exploration through both realist and interpretivist lenses makes visible the existence of multiple perspectives across the three groups, as indicated in the discussion above and further explained below.

The literature examined in Chapter 2 highlighted concerns around the focus of feedback and also its uptake, whether or not students read it and responded. Such concerns found echoes in the data examined in this thesis through a realist lens and commonalities in the responses across the three groups. Both tutors' and students' responses indicate that feedback comments are read, although perhaps not thoroughly. This underpins further discussion around feedback practices. Tutors reported commenting on features of academic writing such as text structuring, and this was considered helpful by students. Tutors indicated being prescriptive within feedback which seems to respond to students' desire for detailed explanations and concern for clarity of institutionally-valued expectations within feedback. Valuing such a prescriptivist monologic focus may be interpreted as aligning with a genre approach to academic writing, which emerged as mostly predominant amongst all three participant groups. Within this valued approach to feedback, a number of different concerns around feedback practices emerged. For example, students and one central academic express the need for feedback to feed forward to future assessments, a concern in the literature (Hughes *et al*, 2015).

There are three further key areas in which the data, examined through an interpretivist lens, indicate how perspectives between the three participant groups converge. Firstly, exploration of monologic/dialogic approaches to feedback suggests that the minimal further discussion following formal written feedback reported by students reflects both the perspectives of tutors who attempt to control the amount of interaction with

students, and the concern of central academics about tutors' limited contracted time to engage open-endedly with students over feedback. Secondly, the division between students valuing categorical monologic feedback advice about academic writing with more freedom and dialogic discussion in respect of subject content is mirrored by tutor Alice, who encourages challenge over subject content but is prescriptive regarding academic writing conventions. Thirdly, the consideration of influential voices within an operationalization of Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia indicates that there are influential voices on feedback practices from outside experiences, such as education and employment, evident across all participant groups and that tutor time spent on feedback is acknowledged as an issue by all participant groups. Further, the perspective of some students that academic writing is separated from their own writing at University may be seen as parallel to the perception of academia as an exclusive environment, as indicated by two central academics. These are some of the ways in which the data indicates how perspectives between participant groups converge.

There are significant ways in which the data both indicate, firstly, how perspectives diverge between groups and, secondly, between individuals within groups. Firstly, divergent perspectives between the three groups seem to relate to how or whether students value tutor feedback. The data indicate that tutor feedback is valued by students who are generally satisfied with the feedback provided. Yet, salient in tutors' discourse are accounts of concerns over student end-of-year feedback, seemingly a strong authoritative voice. Tutors relate difficult relationships with students, and central academics describe managing student-tutor conflict, such as student appeals and complaints. The level of student satisfaction with feedback practices in this study is in contrast to much of the research literature. Student dissatisfaction is cited as justification for investigations into feedback practices, for example by Pitt and Norton



(2017), Court (2014) and Maggs (2014) and is “publicly highlighted” Donovan *et al* (2016:939) by National Student Surveys. There is apparent divergence between groups also regarding tutor agency in feedback practices, reflecting tension along a monologic/dialogic continuum. The marking criteria, devised and issued by central academics, allow tutor agency in interpretation of their grading descriptors, such as “excellent knowledge”, “good knowledge” and “basic understanding” (*Appendix 10.2*). Tutor Vera is unhappy with this: “I disagree with impressionistic marking...There is no standardisation in the way we give feedback”. Tutor Alice, too, is concerned about divergent judgements between tutors.

Secondly, significant individual differences between perspectives emerge. For example, some dialogic engagement with feedback practices, such as in students’ evaluation and appropriation of tutor feedback (as discussed in Chapter 5), appears to thrive, despite the perspective of central academic, Pat that such is prevented by authoritative “power issues”. Reasons for study appear an important influential voice and, whilst many students cite other reasons for study than achieving on the module, particularly subject content and personal development, central academic, Pat insists that the summative grade is their only focus. Whilst students do not report a wish for engagement with other students and there is minimal evidence of their use of social media, Facebook, in particular, is perceived as being a significant alternative voice to tutor feedback by central academic, Alex. Finally, there are different perspectives around monitoring of tutor feedback. Monitoring, an institutional system with a categoric handbook (The Open University, 2011b), is perceived variously both between different groups and by individuals within groups. Perspectives on monitoring’s role as a management tool differ between central academics, and tutors are divided between the perspective of

monitoring as authoritative management control and one of peer feedback and guidance.

The pedagogic and professional implications below (8.3) take account of both converging and divergent perspectives between and amongst participant groups.

#### 8.2.5 The question of time

What also became clear is that whilst the Bakhtinian heuristic proved useful in seeking to explore the nature of feedback in more depth, it highlighted aspects of material practice that extend beyond the framework. The most important example of this is time. The relationship between time and both actual and desired feedback practices was raised by various participants in different groups but all in relation to tutor contracted time. This resonates with concerns in the literature in that most tutor perspectives that are acknowledged around feedback practices tend to be restricted to time constraints and workload pressures, such as by O'Donovan *et al* (2016) and Shields (2015), who highlights the literature's references to the amount of tutor time needed to provide formative feedback (2.4.3).

For tutors in my study, time appears to reference an institutional voice of what is expected, recognised and valued in relation to feedback practices. Contracted paid time is defined by the institution and the conflict arises when feedback practices take more time than allowed, voiced particularly by tutors Vera, Cath and John who explained that tutors might spend "several hours over an assignment that they are paid forty minutes to work on".

Tutor time constraints are mentioned as a concern by all three central academics and particularly by Alex and Pat in their respective roles of managing the day-to-day student-tutor relationships around feedback practices. Alex commented, “tutors only have a certain number of hours a week” and Pat, referring to any potential changes to the system, commented: “The problem from my perspective is [tutors] are paid a certain amount to do certain things.”

However, Pat was not presenting tutor time constraints as a reason to prevent the introduction of more dialogic feedback, but emphasised that such would need to replace, not supplement, the current monologically-oriented system. Time, then, was seen as a constraint specifically on tutor feedback practices in relation to the amount, rather than the nature, of the time spent, such as Alex’s “ideal”, of as much support as a student wants, which Alex recognised would not be equitable between students in relation to tutors’ total contracted hours. The extended time to which John referred (above) is spent on providing formal written feedback. Tutor Alice, who encouraged dialogic discussion around subject content, did not refer to time constraints. Therefore, it seems that changes to affect more dialogic tutor-student feedback practices need not conflict with tutor contracted time constraints.

Interestingly, and surprisingly from my insider position, the only references to time pressures on students in relation to feedback were from tutor John, referring to his own prior student experiences, as limiting his engagement with tutor feedback. Student Mary considered the busy schedule of her tutor who had “a large number of students” but did not refer to time pressures affecting students.

In view of my original aim (1.2.2) to research perspectives within the context of everyday pressures, including time, then the focus more on the contracted time

constraints, rather than time allocation for feedback practices within the context of participants' wider lives, was not as anticipated. Moreover, Carless *et al's* (2011:396) comment (and see 1.2.2), that time is "the greatest pressure on students, module teams and tutors alike, throughout HE" relates to my findings of only one participant group, tutors.

#### 8.2.6 The value and limitations of the Bakhtinian heuristic

The operationalizing of Bakhtin's theories of language and communication as a heuristic for my study provided me with, firstly, some distance from my common-sense assumptions as an insider in feedback practices over many years (as a tutor) and, secondly, an interpretivist framework for exploring in more depth meanings around feedback, in particular, about what it means to engage in dialogue, or be dialogic.

However, several limitations of this heuristic became clear during the research process. Firstly, in prioritising the Bakhtinian heuristic, and therefore working within an interpretivist frame, I felt I might be in danger of losing sight of important realist accounts of the feedback process. I, therefore, decided to try to value both interpretivist and realist approaches to data and findings.

Secondly, I began to be wary of a tendency in my approach to place moral value on the internally persuasive discourse, on agency and a dialogic relationship, framing such as preferred, perhaps influenced by my insider perspective. The notion of agency is related to Bakhtin's early concept of *answerability*, which refers to individual responsibility, leading to action: "The individual must become answerable through and through" (Bakhtin, [1919],1990:2). Bakhtin then associates answerability with moral

responsibility, a focus not so evident in Bakhtin's future writings on dialogic relationships. This conflicted with a main concern underpinning my study to avoid being judgemental, so prioritising one perspective (1.2.4). I needed, therefore, to take care in the writing up of this study to avoid any rigid or judgemental orientations to the perspectives of participants.

Thirdly, perhaps a direct application of a Bakhtinian concept of the dialogic, with its "refusal to close off, finalise" (White, 2014:223), is fundamentally unsuited to a pedagogic context which focuses primarily on an institutionally-valued end goal of a grade or qualification.

However, overall, this thesis has illustrated the value of core Bakhtinian notions, such as internally persuasive discourse and authoritative voice, as a way of reaching a deep understanding of the extent to which dialogue permeates feedback practices.

## **8.3 Pedagogical and professional implications**

This section responds to my final research question: *What are the implications of the findings for the teaching and learning of discipline-based assessed writing?* I highlight key implications through a realist and an interpretivist lens.

### **8.3.1 Implications of realist findings**

- **There is a need to make greater use of communication modes and opportunities for engaging in feedback other than the written comments on students' texts.** The optimum medium amongst students for enhanced

student-tutor interaction around feedback seems to be email. Tutors, too, value email for follow-up student-tutor communication, even for what Andrew referred to as “difficult” issues, although they also indicate the value of telephone interaction. Given the routine use of online platforms since this study was carried out, it would be important to explore students’ and tutors’ perspectives on the value of these platforms for communicating around feedback.

- **There is a need to open up debate about the multiple purposes of marking and feedback.** Some tutors mention preference for standardisation to avoid “impressionistic” marking (Vera) but current marking guidelines allow tutor agency regarding interpretation, which other tutors appear to appreciate. The status and interpretation of marking guidelines, and the extent to which these offer opportunities for tutor agency in marking and communicating feedback, needs to be treated as an important issue of debate, involving all key stakeholders (students, tutors and central academics).
- **There is a need to consider ways in which the expectations of tutors’ feedback role can be better balanced with the reality of the amount of time they are contracted to work.** Both tutors and central academics showed concern that the expectations of tutors around feedback practices were not in balance with the amount of time they were paid to work. The issue of what it is reasonable to expect regarding feedback is an important part of any consideration of the role of tutors in the pedagogic process.

### 8.3.2 Implications of interpretivist findings

The findings and their implications using an interpretivist lens are different in a number of ways from those using the realist lens, complicating any straightforward realist implications for practice.

- **There needs to be a greater critical discussion about what is understood and experienced as ‘dialogue’/‘dialogic’ practices around feedback.** The study indicates that multiple perspectives co-exist, including a range of views on the extent to which feedback practices are dialogic. The study shows that an internally persuasive voice, which questions, appropriates and takes ownership of discourse in the face of authority, can thrive, even when a more monologic context is envisaged by those with inherent authority. This is evidenced by student data (Chapter 5) and supports the view of Sanchez and Dunworth (2015), who found that students encountered agency in various ways and (on page 468) cite Holliday’s (2005) view that agency is “discovered rather than created”. (See 2.5 and 3.3.3 for a discussion of agency.) For example, Julie wanted to be “encouraged to answer the question in my own way”, while acknowledging “there is no right way of doing it” and Phil’s approach to study as “constant learning” suggested a more dialogic approach towards feedback. Whilst to an extent the summative grade, included within tutors’ feedback is monologic, it is appropriated and used as a measure of students’ progress along a learning path, with students taking ownership of the feedback process.
- **There need to be greater opportunities for dialogue around subject content as part of the feedback process.** Evidence suggests that opportunities for

student-tutor dialogic discussion would be appreciated around subject content.

This was emphasised by tutor Alice, for example, and there was evidence of students valuing their own opinions regarding subject content: “that’s my opinion on something and he [the tutor] holds a slightly different one” (Tom).

- **There is a need to broaden what is valued as academic writing as this might facilitate more dialogic discussion in general.** Allowing and encouraging alternative and individual approaches to written texts might avoid the focus within feedback on guiding students towards specific institutionally-valued expectations, such as described by Vera, Cath and Alice: “When it comes to the actual sort of process of writing, then I think I tend to be rather prescriptive” (Alice). This echoes Lillis and Turner’s (2001:57) concern that novice academics are “confronted with a monologic assumption of what language is” when they “bring their uses and misunderstandings with them”. However, such innovation is likely to challenge the smooth-running of the current system with its embedded values, making demands on central academics and tutors charged with implementing this approach.
- **There needs to be a critical debate about the multiple addressees and the range of authoritative voices influencing tutor experiences of feedback practices.** The Bakhtinian heuristic helped make visible that two strong authoritative voices emerged for tutors, the monitoring of their feedback and student criticism. These practices led to the stressful and time-consuming process of tutors providing feedback aimed at multiple addressees (the student, the monitor, their line [regional] manager, a potential student complainant). There needs, therefore, to be a debate about the range of voices shaping feedback.



The above are pedagogical implications from my data derived from the interpretivist lens. The interpretivist framework of a Bakhtinian heuristic also has professional implications. The framework has enabled me to engage in greater depth with notions of dialogue/dialogic around feedback practices and has further helped me in my role as tutor to reflect on the perspectives of other participants in the feedback process and about my own practices. For example, I am developing strategies to consider, elicit, discuss and value students' perspectives when providing feedback on assessed writing which I interpret as being less highly valued in relation to the institution's marking criteria. This Bakhtinian heuristic might prove to be a useful professional development tool more widely.

## **8.4 Limitations of the study**

In this section I reflect on the research process, considering its strengths and limitations, commenting on what I would change in any further research on the basis of this experience. I review the implications of my position as insider researcher, the use of participant groups, the methods of data collection, the methodology and the methods of analysis. Finally, I reflect on the need to update the study.

### *Insider researcher*

Both the affordances and limitations of my undoubted insider perspective were discussed in 4.8. Particularly beneficial was the rapport I had with all interviewees because of shared knowledge and experience, which saved time in explanations of context and led to rich data about individual perspectives. However, rapport with

central academics was more difficult to achieve and I think that the difference in status in our professional roles within the OU inhibited this.

Further, observation during writing up the research uncovered my unexpected level of involvement and subjectivity in terms of showing engagement and empathy with the opinions and feelings expressed by tutor participants, of which I was unaware at the time. This became transparent when reading interview transcripts, such as: John (tutor): “I think in the main Open University [tutors] give more time than they are paid for”; Interviewer (me, replying): “I agree”.

Moreover, in retrospect, assumptions made due to my position as an insider researcher influenced the questions I foregrounded. For example, I assumed when designing the questionnaire that monitoring of feedback practices was a management tool, as did central academics and some tutors. The perception of other tutors that it was peer guidance had not occurred to me. Yet, the different perspectives in this respect emerged, despite this assumption. My assumption of a shared understanding of the situation of studying and tutoring within a distance learning institution, might, in retrospect have been usefully foregrounded within questionnaires and interviews.

In any future study I would be more aware of my insider position in design and data collection.

### *The participant groups*

The extent to which participants can be considered as representatives of participant groups was discussed in 4.5.1. The categorisation of the three participant groups was logical in terms of their respective roles within the feedback process. However, two

concerns emerged, firstly with the nature and description of the central academic participant group and, secondly, regarding the demographics of the student group.

Whilst central academics cannot be considered as a uniform participant group in the same way as students and tutors (see 4.5.2), their different perspectives, due to their differing professional roles, enhanced the richness of data collected and added another dimension to the exploration of multiple perspectives. In retrospect, I do not consider it was feasible to represent the institution with a more cohesive selection of central academics which matched the student and tutor categories.

However, the institutional perspectives category was difficult to describe in relation to the secondary institutional data (official documentation), much of which was not produced by the central academic participants. In effect, both the central academic participants and the documentation represented institutional perspectives, but the two were not one voice, which further differentiated them from the other two categories, where the supplementary data (student demographics and tutor forum contributions) concerned the participants personally.

The second concern was with the student participant group demographics; see the tables in *Appendices 3.1* and *3.2*. As discussed (4.5.1), the student demographics are unrepresentative of the wider cohort in terms of age range and also in relation to prior educational qualifications. Only seven per cent of the entire cohort were over sixty years old, as opposed to 27 per cent of my sample (The Open University, 2012c). This is an important consideration, particularly with the student demographic becoming younger more recently. Whilst only 24 per cent of the whole cohort possessed HE qualifications (The Open University, 2012c), this applied to 56 per cent of my student sample. Again, with changing funding priorities, favouring those without prior HE

study, as opposed to those wishing to change academic and career path, this discrepancy is significant for any wider contemporary application of the study's findings.

The student demographics were limited because participants were volunteers. Only students willing to complete a questionnaire and give 20-40 minutes of their time to a stranger tutor contributed fully and it is unsurprising, therefore, that these students all said they read tutor feedback; these were likely to be students who were committed to engaging with tutors and the module.

If undertaking similar future research, I would need to address these issues, for example, by developing a more structured interview script for the central academic participants, which ensured follow up of key questions. I would endeavour to compensate for any lack of younger students, perhaps by including an individual case study.

#### *The methods of data collection*

The questionnaires and interviews elicited rich data. The questionnaires were a particularly helpful foundation for the semi-structured interviews with students. Other data from documentation and student demographics were useful. In retrospect, I would change some wording in the questionnaires. I dispatched my student questionnaire early in the research process and it used the term "dialogic". I later changed this to "dialogue" before my exploration led me to appreciate that both terms were contested. The social media question, using the term "guidance", in retrospect, was leading, even though I had been advised by student testers to be wary in this regard (4.4.2).

Within interview scripts, I would have included one extra two-part question to all participants: *What are the aspects of the current feedback practices that you think work best? -What do you think could work better?* This would have enhanced the focus and elicited comparative data around perspectives. The greater specificity was particularly needed within central academic interviews, due to the limited time they had available. For example, more time would have enabled me to ask for details of Sam's ideas surrounding an alternative feedback system (7.3.3).

#### *Analysis of feedback texts*

I recognise that analysis of actual tutor written feedback texts would have added another dimension to my research and have illuminated certain comments, such as tutor John's that he felt he should direct students "towards being more scientific". However, as stated above, I wanted to maintain the focus on participants' own declared perspectives around feedback practices.

#### *An ethnographic methodology*

Whilst being an insider researcher meant to an extent that I was a participant, I did not meet an ethnographic tendency to view events "*in situ*" (Freebody, 2003:42). I decided that observing student-tutor dialogue would have been inappropriately intrusive for this research context, which focused on participants' own declared perspectives as a priority. I would maintain this position if I were to repeat this research. However, I recognise that I only touched on the lived experiences of participants, the contexts within which they approached feedback. Judging by the amount they did tell me within a short timeframe, more questions about participants' wider lives in a larger scale survey might have yielded much pertinent data.

### *The methods of analysis*

The decision to consider the data from both a realist and an interpretivist lens has been discussed above (8.2.6). The two additional methods of analysis for official documentation and underpinning approaches to academic writing worked well. I consider that using Anglelil-Carter and Murray's (2006) approach, based on Fairclough (1999) (4.6.4; 7.3) was effective and, ideally, in a larger-scale study, would have been applied to longer extracts. Ivanič's (2004) six discourses (*Appendix 11*), identified a key finding that a genre orientation toward academic writing was mostly dominant amongst all three participant groups and it proved to be a useful tool in facilitating a comparison of perspectives around academic writing. The consideration of apparent overlaps in categorisation, such as whether referencing conventions belong to a 'skills' or 'genre' approach, helped to interrogate how such were viewed by participants. However, limited space within this thesis meant that I was unable to pay as much attention to data analysis according to Ivanič's (2004) framework as would ideally be desirable.

### *The distance learning context*

This study's data was situated within a distance learning context, though the findings are pertinent to other traditional areas of HE. However, the distance learning aspect might have been foregrounded more within questions. The pertinent mention by central academic, Pat, that "dialogic difficulties" between tutors and students within feedback practices were "exacerbated" by the "feedback loop being distant" should have alerted me during interview to follow up the particular effect of this context on feedback practices. Again, my insider perspective led me, and perhaps some participants, not to foreground this context due to our shared understanding of it as the norm.

### *Updating the study*

All data was collected within the same timeframe, so the comparative element between perspectives is valid. However, in two respects it is likely that the data is becoming outdated, firstly, due to advances in use of online technology and social media and, secondly, in the changes to government funding of undergraduate study, which encourage only those who do not have a prior HE qualification and are on a career pathway to participate. In any future study these issues would perhaps affect perspectives around reasons for study, use of social media and preferred media for communication around feedback practices. The demographics of student participants are also likely to be affected.

## **8.5 Future research**

My suggestions for future research mainly concern a more in-depth exploration of multiple perspectives around feedback practices on assessed writing. An extended and updated consideration of what is important and what participants would like to change in the feedback process would be of pedagogic value. Such an investigation would address issues that might have been explored more fully in this study with more time, such as the role of social media, opportunities for dialogic interaction between students-tutors, reasons for study, the issue of time for all participants and the implications of the distance learning context.

The perception of social media as an alternative voice to a tutor's emerged from one central academic's interview as "a pull...so strong". An updated study might investigate more recent developments in this respect. Further exploration of and the desire for the

dialogic possibilities around assessed writing in general would be useful to explore, either within, alongside or separate from tutor feedback. An updated consideration of students' reasons for engaging in academic study are particularly pertinent in view of changing funding conditions imposed by government, discussed above (8.4). The perspectives of younger students would need to be addressed. The issue of time constraints and priorities, which came out strongly regarding tutors in this study, needs to be explored further amongst students and other participants in the feedback process. It is particularly important within a distance learning context whereby study and tutoring take place amidst the broader context of participants' daily lives.

Finally, exploring feedback practices within a distance learning context is of special current importance in view of the need for most traditional universities to adopt similar distanced feedback practices as a result of the virus Covid-19. A future study could usefully focus on multiple perspectives on the particular needs, affordances and limitations of feedback practices surrounding assessed writing within these environments.

## **8.6 Closing reflection**

Wrestling with the complexities of applying Bakhtin's theories of language and communication to my data analysis led me to question frequently why I had not stayed with a transparently meaningful realist analysis, that might be used without complex explanation and could be systematically and satisfyingly categorised. Yet, whenever I attempted to move away from a Bakhtinian heuristic, Bakhtin's theories of language and communication loomed again as pertinent to the whole context of the production of my



thesis: my original rationale for the study on which the thesis is based, my tutoring throughout and alongside my doctoral studies and hence their pedagogical and professional relevance, my discussions with my supervisors and my own experience as a student within the multiplicity of voices in the wider context of my life.

My early tutoring experiences with the OU of providing feedback within one-to-one telephone discussions with students within an introductory module (1.2.1) drew my attention to the multiple voices that competed with the inherent authoritative voice of the institutionally-valued expectations of an OU degree course. This awareness continued to permeate both my tutoring and studies.

Recently, when discussing feedback with a student, I explained that her assessed writing that I had found so interesting to read and mark, so informative, so questioning of social practices, communicating with me, her addressee, through her own voice, influenced by voices from the depth of her experiences, had to have a low grade because it did not meet the institution's marking criteria. I became aware of myself speaking in an authoritative, monologic voice with inherent non-negotiable power, suppressing, quite effectively, the student's internally persuasive discourse.

My research journey has afforded me valued opportunities for in-depth, ongoing, dialogic discussions about Bakhtin's theories and the pedagogical and professional implications of my thesis and related topics through supervision discussions and academic reading groups. Further, my journey as a writer has no end-goal and, in student, Phil's words, it is part of my "constant learning".

Throughout this journey, I have been continually aware of the multiple voices pulling me in different directions, including: my previous educational experiences, my

supervisors as expert others with their depth of academic experience, both my own and my supervisors' (differing) insider perspectives, my peers, my ongoing work priorities and family pressures.

Then, of course, over my approximately eight years of doctoral study, there has been a growing and finally a pressing tension, particularly within supervision discussions, between keeping 'difference in play' and an inevitable dialectic/monologic pull towards meeting the official requirements of an EdD thesis and to actually bringing this exploration to synthesis and, at least a temporary, conclusion.

## **8.7 Summary**

This final chapter concluded my exploration of multiple perspectives around feedback practices on assessed writing in HE. I began this chapter with an overview of perspectives using the overarching Bakhtinian heuristic (8.2), including a discussion of the extent of multiple perspectives in the feedback process (8.2.1) and of the finding of central importance of time regarding tutor feedback practices (8.2.2). I considered the value and limitations of this Bakhtinian framework for my study (8.2.3). Then I suggested pedagogical and professional implications of my study's findings (8.3), both through a realist (8.3.1) and an interpretivist lens (8.3.2). I discussed the limitations of my study (8.4), leading to suggestions for future, more in-depth research into perspectives around feedback practices on assessed writing (8.5). Finally, I reflected on my experience of producing this thesis (8.6).

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## **APPENDICES**



## APPENDICES

### **Appendix 1: Research questions (for ease of reference)**

My research questions, which focus on the exploration of the three identified key perspectives are stated below and are also included in *Appendix 1*, for ease of reference.

- 1. What are students' perspectives around feedback practices on assessed writing?**
- 2. What are tutors' perspectives around feedback practices on assessed writing?**
- 3. What are the institution's perspectives around feedback practices on assessed writing?**

On the basis of the three empirical research questions, my aim was to explore two further questions:

- 4. To what extent are there multiple perspectives around feedback practices on assessed writing?**

And I include a reflection question, which addresses the pedagogical relevance of my study:

- 5. What are the implications of the findings for the teaching and learning of discipline-based assessed writing?**

## Appendix 2:

### Focus and research interests of the literature reviewed (in Chapter 2)

Study authors	Country (of research)	Level Researched (all are HE)	Focus on writing?	Distance Learning?	Type of study
Adams and McNab (2012)			B		
Adcroft and Willis (2013)			B		
Bailey and Garner (2010)			B		
Bloxham and Campbell (2010)			B		Evaluating a system
Cane (2009)	(mainly) Central Europe		B	DL	
Carless <i>et al</i>	Hong Kong		B		
Cartney (2010)			B		
Chetwynd and Dobbyn (2011)			E	DL	
Court (2014)			A		
Crimmins <i>et al</i> (2016)	Australia		B		
Crisp (2007)	Australia		A		
Dawson <i>et al</i> (2018)	Australia		B		
Dunworth and Santiago (2016)		PG	B		
Duncan (2009)			A		
Granville and Dison (2009)	South Africa		A		
Hughes <i>et al</i> (2015)			B		Evaluating a system
Jackson and Marks (2016)		PG (Masters)	B		
Li and De Luca (2014)			A		Pedagogical discussion
Maggs (2014)			D		
Nicol (2010)			A		Pedagogical discussion
Nicol <i>et al</i> (2014)			D		
O'Donovan <i>et al</i> (2014)			B		Pedagogical discussion
Pereira <i>et al</i> (2016)	Portugal		B		
Pitt and Norton (2017)			B		
Price <i>et al</i> (2010)		UG and PG	B		

Scott (2014)	Australia		B		
Shields (2015)			B		
<b>Study authors</b>	<b>Country of research</b>	<b>Level of study</b>	<b>Focus on writing?</b>	<b>Distance Learning?</b>	<b>Type of study</b>
Steen-Utheim and Wittek (2017)	Norway		A		
Taylor and da Silva (2014)	Australia		C		
Tuck (2012; 2013)			A	Includes DL	
Wakefield <i>et al</i> (2014)			B		Evaluating a system
Weaver (2006)			C		
Wingate (2010)			A		
Wingate (2019)			A		
Young (2000)			B		

## **Key**

**Study authors:** Authors of the research or pedagogical discussion

**Country of research** Country in which the research was undertaken  
– only stated if the country is not the UK

**Level of study:** PG = postgraduate  
UG – undergraduate  
If not stated, then research is based on an undergraduate level only.  
(All studies are based in HE.)

**Focus on writing?** Coded as below:

**A:** Focus is stated as feedback on assessed writing

**B:** Whilst assessed writing is not foregrounded, it is implicit that this is the focus of the feedback discussed, for example, because of mention of a student “essay” (Hughes *et al*, 2015:1085) or written assignment.

**C:** Whilst essay writing is not mentioned, that the feedback discussed is on assessed writing is implied by the main subject content on which the feedback is based, such as Creative Writing (Taylor and da Silva, 2014)



**D:** Whilst the main subject is not necessarily one in which the focus is on writing, writing is involved to an extent in the assessments, such as course work for life sciences (Maggs, 2014)

**E:** The subject on which the feedback is focused does not imply any significant level of writing but the discussion around feedback practices resonates with studies and my own study in its context and is therefore pertinent – this applies to one study – Chetwynd and Dobbyn (2011)

**Distance Learning?** Indicated here are those studies which include a focus on a distance learning institution. All other examples are of traditional Higher Education institutions.

**Focus of study:** There are three categories:

<b>Empirical research</b>	All studies which are not categorised
<b>Pedagogical discussion</b>	Studies which review literature on the topic
<b>Evaluating a system</b>	Studies which devise a system and then undertake a research project to evaluate this.

## Appendix 3: Student perspectives: data collection

### Appendix 3.1 Student participants: age range

Age range	Cohort <sup>32</sup>	Questionnaire sample	Interviewees
<b>Under 21</b>	8% (89)	0% (0)	0% (0)
<b>21-25</b>	11% (124)	2% (1)	0% (0)
<b>26-30</b>	17% (201)	10% (5)	0% (0)
<b>31-35</b>	}	4% (2)	0% (0)
<b>36-40</b>	}(30-39) 26% (299)	19% (10)	0% (0)
<b>41-45</b>	}	15% (8)	22% (2) (Phil, Mary)
<b>46-50</b>	}(40-49) 22% (259)	15% (8)	0% (0)
<b>51-55</b>	}	4% (2)	11% (1) (Tom)
<b>55-60</b>	}(50-59) 10% (118)	4% (2)	0% (0)
<b>61-65</b>	4% (41)	15% (8)	44% (4) (Martin, Carl, Julie)
<b>66 and over</b>	3% (34)	12% (6)	22% (2) (Ben, Rose)

**Source:** The Open University (2012c) 'IET Module Profile Tool', Milton Keynes: The Open University (internal document)

(used with permission)

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<sup>32</sup> The numbers for the whole cohort are approximate as the provided age bands differ slightly between sources.

### Appendix 3.2: Student participants: gender

<b>Sample</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>Female</b>
<b>Whole cohort</b>	27% (312)	73% (853)
<b>Questionnaire sample</b>	33% (17)	67% (35)
<b>Interviewees</b>	56% (5)	44% (4)

**Source:** The Open University (2012c) 'IET Module Profile Tool', Milton Keynes: The Open University (internal document)

(used with permission)

### Appendix 3.3: Covering email invitation to students to participate in the questionnaire

Subject Header: The Open University: Dialogic<sup>33</sup> Feedback on Academic Writing Survey

**Student Statistics and  
Survey Team**

The Open University  
Walton Hall  
Milton Keynes  
MK7 6AA  
United Kingdom



Tel +44 (0)1908 652422/652423  
Fax +44 (0)1908 654173  
[www.open.ac.uk](http://www.open.ac.uk)

#### Dialogic Feedback on Academic Writing Survey

Dear ^forename^

I am supervising an EdD research project by Jane Cobb into tutors' and students' perspectives and experiences of feedback around academic writing. As you know, academic writing continues to be central to undergraduate courses, particularly in terms of assessment, but there is relatively little research which seeks to explore how feedback is used and whether there are particular types of feedback that either (or both) tutors and students consider particularly useful. Jane Cobb's work will therefore make an important contribution to this area of work and I am sure will be of great interest to you should you decide to participate in her study. At this stage, Jane is inviting people to respond to a questionnaire details of which are provided after you click on the link below. The questionnaire should take you about 15 minutes to complete. As Jane also explains in her introduction letter **any information you supply will be kept confidentially and that when the research is written up, you will not be identified with your comments.**

I hope you will consider completing the questionnaire. If you have any general queries or concerns about this project please contact me (Theresa Lillis) [theresa.lillis@open.ac.uk](mailto:theresa.lillis@open.ac.uk). For all specific details about participating, please contact Jane directly at [r.j.cobb@open.ac.uk](mailto:r.j.cobb@open.ac.uk).

If you have a disability or an additional requirement that makes it difficult for you to complete the survey online, please [email the survey office](mailto:IET-Surveys@open.ac.uk) IET-Surveys@open.ac.uk, or telephone them on +44 (0)1908 652422/652423.

Yours sincerely

Dr. Theresa Lillis, Professor in English Language and Applied Linguistics,  
Centre for Language and Communication  
The Open University

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<sup>33</sup> Note for Appendix: 'Dialogic' was at an early stage used in survey literature but it was later changed to 'dialogue', 'dialogic' being a contested term.

## Appendix 3.4: Student questionnaire

### **(FINAL [WORD] VERSION OF STUDENT QUESTIONNAIRE)**

#### **QUESTIONNAIRE:**

#### **12542 - DIALOGIC FEEDBACK ON ACADEMIC WRITING<sup>34</sup>**

**welcome - Welcome**

Welcome

Dear ^f("forename")^,

I should very much appreciate your views about feedback on your academic writing and so I am inviting you to respond to a questionnaire. This is part of my EdD research. I am particularly interested in your experiences as a student currently completing module U214, Worlds of English. The questionnaire should take you about 15 minutes to complete.

I want to emphasise that I am not making judgements about the ways in which students (or tutors) approach feedback. Rather, I am interested in students' and tutors' perspectives on feedback practices and on what is valued and for what purpose, focusing on U214 (on which I am a tutor).

Further, I can assure you that any information you supply will be kept confidentially and that when the research is written up, you will not be identified with your comments. All personal contact details will be destroyed unless you agree to further contact - in which case, any contact information you supply will be stored confidentially.

If you agree to participate, then please answer the following questions. Most of the questions require you to indicate your preference from a choice by checking a box. Other questions are open and ask you to make comments in a 'comments' box. At the end of the questionnaire, there is a space for any further comments about feedback practices that you wish to make.

I do hope that you will find time to complete this questionnaire. If you are happy to do so, then click on the 'next' button below. If you have any queries at all about the questionnaire, now or at a later stage, then please email me at the following address: [r.j.cobb@open.ac.uk](mailto:r.j.cobb@open.ac.uk)

Kind regards

Rachel JANE Cobb

---

<sup>34</sup> Note for Appendices: This title was the one given originally to the survey: 'dialogic' and 'academic' were later replaced by 'dialogue' and 'assessed' as it became appreciated that both are contested terms.

If you encounter any problems completing the questionnaire, please email the survey team:

IET-Surveys@open.ac.uk

Please click on the next button to continue

*Data Protection Information*

*The data you provide will be used for research and quality improvement purposes and the raw data will be seen and processed only by The Open University staff and its agents. This project is administered under the OU's general data protection policy guidelines.*

**Info1 - Your involvement with U214**

The first questions are general ones about your involvement with U214

**q1 - Have you attended any U214 tutorials or a day school?**

Have you attended any U214 tutorials or a day school?

*(Please select all that apply)*

Yes, face to face tutorial / day school (1)

Yes, tutorial via Elluminate (2)

No, I would have liked to attend but I wasn't able to (3)

No, I don't find tutorials useful (4)

**q2 - What is your main goal in studying this module?**

What is your main goal in studying this module?

You need only be brief!

*Please comment here:*

**Info2 - Now think about most recent TMA feedback**

Now think about the most recent TMA feedback that you have received.

**q3 - Did you read the comments made by your tutor on the feedback form?**

Did you read the comments made by your tutor on the feedback form?

*(Please select one only)*

Yes, thoroughly (1)

Yes, glanced at them (2)

No (3)

**q4 - Did you read comments made by your tutor on your script?**

Did you read comments made by your tutor on your script?

*(Please select one only)*

Yes, thoroughly (1)

Yes, glanced at them (2)

No (3)

**q5 - Did you look back at your tutor's previous comments (on the script and/or on the feedback form)**

Did you look back at your tutor's previous comments (on the script and/or on the feedback form) when preparing your most recent assignment?

*(Please select one only)*

Yes (1)

No (2)

**q6 - Have you ever discussed assignment feedback with your tutor on this module (U214)?**

Have you ever discussed assignment feedback with your tutor on this module (U214)?

*(Please select all that apply)*

Yes, by telephone, initiated by me (1)

Yes, by telephone, initiated by my tutor (2)

Yes, by email, initiated by me (3)

Yes, by email, initiated by my tutor (4)

Yes, at an additional face to face session (5)

Yes, during a tutorial (6)

Yes, via the tutor group forum (7)

No (8)

**q7 - Preferred method for any discussion of assignment feedback with your tutor**

What would be your preferred method for any discussion of assignment feedback with your tutor?

*(Please select one only)*

Telephone (1)

Email (2)

Face to face (individual) (3)

Face to face (at a tutorial) (4)

Tutor group forum (5)

Prefer not to discuss feedback with my tutor (6)

**q8 - Have you received any guidance, advice or feedback on assignments from any other source, other than from your tutor?**

Have you ever received any guidance, advice or feedback on any aspect of assignments from any other source, other than from your tutor? (either before or after you submitted your TMA to your tutor)?

*(Please select all that apply)*

Yes, from a student adviser (1)

Yes, from another member of Open University staff (2)

Yes, from another student on my module at a tutorial session (3)

Yes, from another student on my module, other than at a tutorial session (4)

Yes, from a friend who is not studying my module (5)

Yes, from a family member who is not studying my module (6)

Yes, via social media (e.g. Facebook) (7)

No (8)

**Info3 - Now please think about any discussion on your academic work for U214**

Now please think about any discussion (such as in the form of advice or feedback) on your academic study for U214, not only with regard to assignments.

**q9 - What has been the most helpful example of feedback or advice received?**

What has been the most helpful example of feedback or advice concerning your academic work for U214 that you have received?

*Please comment here:*

--

**q10 - Was this advice (mentioned in your response to the previous question) from:**

Was this advice (mentioned in your response to the previous question) from:

*(Please select all that apply and then give further information in the comment boxes, if you wish)*

Your tutor: (1)\_\_\_\_\_

Another person: (2)\_\_\_\_\_

Another source e.g. book/internet: (3)\_\_\_\_\_

**q11 - Can you provide an example of one piece of advice from your tutor that wasn't helpful?**

Can you provide an example of one piece of advice from your tutor that you do not feel was helpful to you?



Please comment here:

CONDITION	f('q11').toBoolean()	
	True	false
	Question q11a(Why did you think that the advice mentioned was not helpful?)	

q11a - Why did you think that the advice mentioned was not helpful?

Why did you think that the advice mentioned was not helpful?

(Please select all that apply and then explain further in the comment boxes, if you wish)

I did not understand what my tutor meant: (1)\_\_\_\_\_

The advice did not relate to my study goals: (2)\_\_\_\_\_

I don't know: (3)\_\_\_\_\_

Another reason: (4)\_\_\_\_\_

END	Condition f('q11').toBoolean()
-----	--------------------------------

q12 - Can you give an example of any discussion or advice that you think would have been helpful but that you did not receive from your tutor?

Can you give an example of any discussion or advice that you think would have been helpful but that you did not receive from your tutor?

Please comment here:

CONDITION	f('q12').toBoolean()	
	True	false
	Question ()	

**q12a - Did you manage to obtain the advice mentioned in your response to the previous question?**

Did you manage to obtain the advice mentioned in your response to the previous question from another source?

Yes (1)

No (2)

**q12b - Please give details if you wish:**

Please give details if you wish:

--

END

Condition f('q12').toBoolean()

**Info4 - The next question asks about your willingness to participate in follow up telephone interview**

The next question asks about your willingness to participate in a brief follow up telephone conversation arranged at a time convenient to you. (This would take place after your submission date for your End of Module Assessment for U214.)

If you agree to future contact, then I shall keep the contact details that you give me confidentially. I shall destroy these details when I have completed my research. If I use any information you have given me, either as a result of participation in this questionnaire or in a telephone conversation, then I shall ensure that you are not personally identifiable.

**q13 - Would you be willing to participate in a brief telephone conversaton?**

Would you be willing to participate in a brief telephone conversation to follow up points made on this questionnaire at a convenient time after 10th October?

Yes (1)

No (2)

CONDITION

f('q13')== '1'

True

Question q13a(Please provide your preferred contact details below.)

false

**q13a - Please provide your preferred contact details below.**

Please provide your preferred contact details below (email address and/or telephone number)

Name: (1)

Email address, if applicable: (2)

Telephone number, if applicable: (3)

If telephone, please indicate your preferred time of day for contact,

e.g. Morning or Afternoon, or Both: (4)


If by telephone, please indicate your preferred day(s) for contacting you, e.g. Mon, Tues, Weds, Thurs, Fri, or All: (5)

END

Condition  $f(q_{13}) = '1'$

**Info5 - And finally.....**

And finally.....

**q14 - Any further comments**

That's the end of my questions but do add any further comments below that you wish to make about feedback or dialogue about your assignments or academic work/study for U214.

*Please comment here:*

STOP

**Complete** – You have now successfully reached the end of the survey.

*You have now successfully reached the end of the survey.*

*Thank you very much for your help.*

*Jane Cobb*

*Please click on the 'ok' button which will register your responses, and also redirect you to the Open University's website.*

*(You can then either just close the browser window, or continue using the OU website)*

## Appendix 3.5: Semi-structured interview script: students (with rationale)

(As submitted for approval to the Student Research Project Panel [SRPP])

**SRPP 2012/059**

### **Follow up to questionnaire 12542: 'Dialogic feedback on academic writing'<sup>35</sup>**

**Proposed questions for semi-structured telephone interviews with selected students who have agreed to telephone interviews as part of a questionnaire response.**

*Questions are intended to follow up and encourage development of points made within questionnaire responses.*

#### Initially

1. Confirm the type of questions that will be asked (outlined in an email) and the length of the interview – about 20 minutes but 30 minutes max. and to check that student is comfortable with this
2. Check that it is acceptable that the interview will be recorded (if not acceptable, to make notes instead)
3. To reassure that:
  - a. the data will be kept confidentially
  - b. the data will only be used for the research purposes outlined
  - c. the student will not be identified with their data
  - d. the student can back out at any time before the data is written up.
4. To check that student has my contact details for the above purpose.

#### Main questions:

(First questions – to all)

- 1. *As I mentioned, most of the questions I'm going to ask simply follow up points that you made when you completed the questionnaire. However, I'd like to start with***

---

<sup>35</sup> Note for Appendices: Original title of the questionnaire; this was changed later to avoid the use of the contested term, 'dialogic'

***an extra question. I wonder what you understand by 'academic writing'? – What does this mean to you?***

(Don't press this if the student finds it difficult to answer – that in itself is important data)

Ask one follow up question, if appropriate (not if the student, for instance, has declared that they already have a degree...)

- 2. May I ask what sort of experience of academic writing you had before you undertook this module?***

***Thank you – that's really helpful. All the rest of my questions refer to your comments on the questionnaire.***

(These questions will be asked selectively – otherwise the interview would be too long. So which questions are asked will relate to where there is information on the form that I should like to follow up.)

Purpose Q. 3: to Follow up on information about guidance from tutors/others

- 3. You mentioned that you had guidance from x, can you tell me a bit more about that?***

Purpose Q. 4: follow up re 'helpful'/'unhelpful' feedback/what other feedback would have liked to have – trying to find out if feedback was what was student able to take on board for the future and if unhelpful, why – did it conflict with expectations? And if other feedback was wanted which the student did not receive [often wanted was TMA advice] – then be more **specific**)

- 4. You mentioned how helpful x feedback was, how far have you been able to use this in your academic writing since then?***
- 5. You mentioned that x comment was unhelpful, why did you think this comment wasn't useful to you?***
- 6. You mentioned that you would have liked more advice about x, can you explain a bit more about that? (Prompt: Do you mean....x)***
- 7. Finally, is there anything else you would like to say?***

Finally

**8. *Thank you very much for your time and trouble which is much appreciated. Before we finish, do you have any questions at all about the research?***

**9. *Would you like me to keep in touch about findings generally?***

**Turn off the recorder and tell student that this has been done.**

Jane Cobb

February, 2013

### Appendix 3.6: Standard student cohort demographics

(available from University registration)

#### **List of standard demographics:**

- Sex
- Ethnicity
- Age
- Occupation
- Motivation for study
- Socio-economic group
- Region – where the student is registered for study
- New/continuing status – whether they are new to the OU or have studied before
- FAF – Whether they receive financial assistance for studying this course
- Previous educational qualifications on entry to the OU
- Disability status, and details of any declared disability
- Award intention – whether they have declared an award intention, and if so the details of those award(s)

### Appendix 3.7: Student interviewees: full profiles

#### *Ben*

Ben was in the 'over 66' age group (UD) and had been involved in writing for much of his working life, editing policy documents within a government department "to make [them] more accessible". His declared reason for study from the categories offered by the OU (UD) was 'mainly personal development'. Ben explained that as he had not been to university, he considered that studying "would be a good way of using time in retirement" and as he need not "study for professional qualifications", his motivations were to "expand my education and to widen my knowledge of the English language", his personal subject interest being "the history of English and its present role as a global *lingua franca*" (questionnaire). Ben, then, appeared to be focused on the process of academic study, rather than a goal, such as a grade/qualification. He explained that he was only taking a qualification "sort of on paper" and that he was in no hurry to continue: "I prefer to wait to see if there is a subject that really grabs me" because how he spent his time in retirement was important, as study takes "a chunk out of your life".

#### *Carl*

Carl belonged to the '61-65' age group (UD) and was employed as a Chef Manager. Whilst his main declared study goals on registration (UD) had been both personal and career development, Carl indicated his reason for study as 'personal development' in his questionnaire response. Carl had little experience of HE, leaving school at age 16 to take a catering qualification. The words that Carl used suggested that he found the academic process an ongoing battle; for example, he said that, passing one module had been "a bit of a struggle" and his tutor had helped him to "realise what I was tackling".



### *Dawn*

Dawn, in the 61-65 age group (UD), was the only student interviewee still in employment who declared 'personal development' as her reason for study (UD), expressing this as 'personal interest' in her questionnaire response. Dawn was working as a University teaching assistant, having retired recently from her main role as a University Language Co-ordinator; she had "stepped back" because she "got sick of administration", so it seems evident that she was not studying for career advancement. However, Dawn explained that although she was taking the module "for fun" she still had "a certain pride in it" to do well. Dawn was the most experienced student interviewee academically, with a degree and two Masters (Education and Russian). Dawn's discourse echoed her wide experience of HE and she reflected on the differences in tutor expectations between disciplines, considering that feedback is useful so that these requirements can be grasped, because of the "amount of strategic planning that goes into writing" in terms of "what a particular tutor is looking for".

### *Julie*

Julie was in the '61-65' age group (UD), had retired from her role as I.T. services Project Manager and was studying for a degree in Modern Languages. Although the studied module was a compulsory component for her degree, it was Julie who insisted (without prompt) that: "I'm doing it for pleasure...not for gain" and she had declared her reason for study as 'personal development' (UD) and "interest in modern languages" as her study goal on the questionnaire. Even so, she appeared to measure her success by tutor-allocated grades. Julie explained that during the studied module, she "improved" in respect of academic work; I asked Julie how she measured this, whether in terms of feedback comments or grades; she confirmed "in terms of grades". Julie considered that

she “didn’t really have any experience” of academic writing before the studied module, as the French modules that she had taken previously

“are different, as you’ve got the more rigid organisation of essays....I didn’t really class that as academic writing”.

### *Martin*

Martin (aged 61-65 [UD]) had much previous experience of HE through his studies of Mechanical Engineering but said he had little experience of academic writing (as he perceived it). Martin was a retired Design Engineer. His narration of his educational journey to date appeared as an account of his negative encounters with the education system. He “failed his finals” and his “writing ability was not very good”. Martin, then, had technical qualifications but not a degree. He declared he was studying for personal development only (UD) and “mainly personal development” on the questionnaire. Martin’s discourse appeared to suggest his perception of learning as following a path, an ongoing process, such as when relating his experiences of academic writing:

“before I did *Worlds of English*<sup>36</sup>, I’d done a three-year German course...before that I studied at [name] Polytechnic...before that I was at the University of [name]”

until “eventually The Open University”, providing a narrative of his academic experience to date.

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<sup>36</sup> The module studied by this researched cohort.

### *Mary*

Mary was a relatively younger student interviewee, being in her early forties (UD). She had 'A' levels and worked as a part-time tutor of English to Speakers of Other Languages. She explained in interview that she studied both for interest and professional relevance; she had elaborated her reasons on the questionnaire:

“to gain a fuller understanding of how the English language is structured and used out of personal interest and for professional use”.

Mary declared herself not to be a native speaker of English. She said that her main experience of academic writing was with the OU, “producing work for the course....I mean I’ve got ‘A’ levels but I wouldn’t include that personally”.

### *Phil*

Phil fell within the ‘41-45’ age bracket (UD), had a degree in Computer Studies and worked as an I.T. Consultant. Employment and personal development were equally important reasons for study (UD); this module was a compulsory part of Phil’s degree. Confidence in his academic writing pervaded Phil’s discourse, using construction/building metaphors to refer to his progress, of a “framework” involving learning “how to build an academic essay”, which he had “nailed the way” to do; he had “mastered the technique” and could now concentrate on “the conceptual side of things”, valuing the exchange of ideas with fellow students.

### *Rose*

Rose (over 66 [UD]) had no prior academic qualifications beyond ‘O’ level equivalents, had retired from her role as an accounts office manager and was taking her BA (Hons)

Humanities degree for personal development (UD and questionnaire). A theme of Rose's discourse was her criticism of the studied module regarding its academic writing requirements which "should have been heavily underlined" within its prospectus (questionnaire). Rose commented:

"It soon became apparent that my ability to write academic essays was woefully below par. I may unfortunately have missed any reference to this requirement before I enrolled on the course."

### *Tom*

Tom belonged to the '51-55' age group (UD). He had no prior formal qualifications above GCSE equivalent (UD). Although Tom was retired as a firefighter (questionnaire), he declared employment and personal development equally important reasons for studying (UD). His study goal was "to gain the requisite amount for my degree and to complement my music modules" (questionnaire). Key themes emerging throughout Tom's interview were his constant concern to stay "on track" and his focus on what he referred to as the importance of (his own) clarity of message: "the biggest thing for me, making sure that the words I'm using...are the words I'm trying to say". As Tom needed this module for his degree, I suggested (within interview) that tutor feedback would be most useful to him in relation to grading; Tom corrected me: "not just for the marks that you get but to make sure I'm understanding and getting the point", although Tom saw tutor-allocated grades as confirming that he was on the "right track".

## Appendix 4: Tutor perspectives: data collection

### Appendix 4.1: Request to tutors to participate in research (email)

As you know, I tutor on U214<sup>37</sup> for Region (-)<sup>38</sup>. I am also studying towards my EdD with the Open University and my research project focuses on a comparative investigation of multiple perspectives on dialogic feedback on academic writing. I intend to base my study on U214. I am in the initial stages at present and I want to begin my research with a questionnaire to both students (a random sample nationally and not identified with any particular tutor group) and tutors (----)<sup>39</sup> presentation tutors only at this stage). I am attempting to find out about perspectives on feedback – practices that exist and what is valued and for what purpose. All data will be kept confidentially and no participant will be identified with the data when my research is written up.

I should greatly appreciate it if you were to agree to complete a questionnaire about your feedback practices on U214. I shall send this to you within the next few days, if you agree. (---)<sup>40</sup>, our Regional Staff Tutor has given permission for me to send out the questionnaires within our Region and the study has been approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee and the Open University's Data Protection organisation.

There is no need to feel obligated to respond if you do not wish to do so or do not have the time. Moreover, please feel free to withdraw your agreement at any time before you submit your questionnaire responses. I envisage that the questionnaire will take approximately 15 minutes to complete.

As this is a formal request, then if you do agree to complete, please send me a message confirming your agreement by reply to this email address

- r.j.cobb@open.ac.uk

Please do not hesitate to ask if there are any queries about the questionnaire or the procedure.

Regards,

Jane Cobb

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<sup>37</sup> Note for Appendices: The numerical code for module *Worlds of English*, on which this study is based

<sup>38</sup> Note for Appendices: Missing is the numerical code for the Region within which I tutored (omitted here to avoid the identification of participants)

<sup>39</sup> Note for Appendices: a phrase omitted here which might have led to the identification of participant/s

<sup>40</sup> Note for Appendices: a personal name removed here for identity protection reasons

#### Appendix 4.2: Request to tutors for permission to retain and refer to online forum contributions

I tutor on U214<sup>41</sup> and I began studying towards my EdD with the Open University last May. My research is into multiple perspectives on communication over feedback on academic writing. I intend to base my study on U214.

As part of my research, I would like to refer to comments on tutor fora, particularly on the U214 tutor forum, with regard to feedback issues. Emphatically, I would treat these as confidential – not including names or any identifying features when I write up my research.

If you would be willing for me to refer to comments you have made within our tutor forum for the duration of my research, then I should be most grateful if you would sign below. I ask for your email address, so that if I need to gain further permission, I am able to do so. My contact details are included below – please do then let me know if you change your mind about permission at any stage before my research is written up or if you need any further information or assurance.

Jane Cobb

[r.j.cobb@open.ac.uk](mailto:r.j.cobb@open.ac.uk)

01384 835493

***I give my permission for my comments on the U214 tutor forum to be quoted and referred to within Jane's research. I understand I shall not be identified with these comments and that I can withdraw my permission at any time before the research is written up.***

<u>Name</u>	<u>email address (if wish to give)</u>
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<sup>41</sup> Note for Appendices: This is the numerical code of the module. *Worlds of English*, the module on which this study is based.

### Appendix 4.3: Template email to tutors who had agreed their participation

*(Note: This template letter to tutors who had agreed to participate in my research was amended slightly when addressed to those tutors with whom I had had personal contact since their agreement.)*

Dear

You might remember that I am studying for an EdD (Doctorate in Education) with the Open University. (I'm now in my second year.) I am looking at different/multiple perspectives on communication around feedback practices on academic writing. I am therefore investigating both students' and tutors' viewpoints, as well as the views of representatives of the institution.

Some time ago, you very kindly agreed to allow me to refer (anonymously) to your comments in our U214<sup>42</sup> tutor forum. You also mentioned to me that you would be willing to participate in my research further.

I do appreciate that some time has lapsed since you agreed to help me and my apologies for not contacting you in the meantime about this. I've been involved in other aspects of my research and of course my literature review since then.

Firstly, I should like to ascertain whether you were an Associate Lecturer on the 2012B presentation of U214? (That was the first presentation of this module.) That's because I'm basing my study on this module and its cohort of students and their tutors. (However, I do not expect you to remember details of what happened in this module – there will be no memory test!)

If you agree, and were an Associate Lecturer on the 2012B presentation of U214, what I request is:

1. Completion of a short questionnaire which I shall send to you via email. (I estimate this will take about 15 minutes to complete.)
2. Participation in a follow up telephone interview which I should like to record, with your permission. This should take about 20 minutes – but no more than 30 minutes of your time. We can arrange this to suit – there is no urgency.

I can reassure you that all data will be kept confidentially and that when I write up my research you will not be identified with your comments.

If you now feel that you have no time or do not wish to participate, then of course I can well understand that – please just let me know.

If you are still willing to help, then let me know and I'll send you the short questionnaire via email.

Many thanks

Regards, Jane Cobb

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<sup>42</sup> Note for Appendices: This is the numerical code of the module, *Worlds of English*, the module on which this study is based.

#### Appendix 4.4: Request to tutors to include personal details (email)

You kindly participated in my research and I assured you that your data would be kept confidentially and that when I write up my findings I shall not identify you with your comments; I am using alternative names, for instance.

In writing up my research, I realise it would be helpful for me to include very brief biographical details (as I have done for my student participants). However, I do not intend to include these without your permission (and, most likely, I don't know them anyway). Therefore, I should be most grateful if you would let me have any of the following information that you are happy for me to mention – please be as non-specific as you wish to be or just let me know if you don't want me to include any information for a particular category. The information requested is:

Experience (years) of OU tutoring/as an AL<sup>43</sup>

Age/age range

Other work you do currently (no detail needed e.g. "schoolteacher")

Other studying you do currently (just "I am currently studying for a qualification" if you like)

Other work prior to joining the OU

I reiterate – only give the information you would be happy for me to use when I describe my sample and remember that any details I do include will not be linked with your name or regional location.

Many thanks!

Best wishes

Jane

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<sup>43</sup> Note for Appendices: Associate Lecturer – (equated with 'tutor' for the purposes of this research)



## Appendix 4.5: Tutor questionnaire

*Thank you very much for agreeing to help with my research by completing this questionnaire on your perspectives on feedback practices for U214<sup>44</sup>. As explained in my previous email message, I am studying towards my Doctorate in Education and I am undertaking this research as part of this qualification. As you know, I am also an Associate Lecturer on (---)<sup>45</sup> and I want to base my research on this module. I am particularly interested in multiple perspectives on dialogue about feedback on academic study and assignments in this module – what practices exist and what is valued by tutors and students.*

*It is important to me to emphasise that I am not making any value judgements about practices and approaches of either students or tutors. Further, I want to assure you that when I write up my research, you will not be identified with your comments.*

*Please answer the following questions. Some of the questions are open ones and require just a short response which I request that you insert below my question. You might wish to use a different font or capitals. Other questions are closed and require you to highlight (or to indicate another way) which option best suits your situation. Please feel free to make any further comments, if you wish. I estimate that the questionnaire will take about 15 minutes to complete.*

*Please then send your completed questionnaire back to me via email at:*

*[r.j.cobb@open.ac.uk](mailto:r.j.cobb@open.ac.uk)*

*Do contact me if you have any queries or concerns about this research, either at the above email address or by telephone on 07970955297.*

### **QUESTIONS**

**The first questions are about feedback on assignments through the eTMA system**

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<sup>44</sup> Note for Appendices: This is the numerical code of the module. *Worlds of English*, the module on which this study is based.

<sup>45</sup> Note for Appendices: Geographical area for tutoring removed, to avoid possible identification of participants.

1. *Generally, do you think that students read feedback comments you make on their assignments?*

Yes, thoroughly

Yes, but just glance at them

No

2. *Do you feel that generally U214 students make use of previous feedback provided on their assignments through the eTMA system when preparing further TMAs?*

Usually, yes

Sometimes, yes

Just occasionally

No

3. *Can you provide one example of an item of feedback on an assignment that you have given which has proved to be effective? (..without identifying a particular student by name)*

4. *During this presentation of U214, have you followed up feedback on a student's eTMA cover sheet/script comments with further contact? (Please highlight all of the statements below that apply)*

Yes, via email

Yes, during an Elluminate/OU Live tutorial<sup>46</sup>

Yes, during a face-to-face tutorial

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<sup>46</sup> Note for Appendices: These are systems for online tutorials, Elluminate concurrently being replaced by OU Live

Yes, at a special (individual) face-to-face session

Yes, at a special (individual) Elluminate session

Yes, by telephone

No (go to question 7)

5. *If you answered “yes” to the above question, please provide one example of a particular circumstance which caused you to follow up formal feedback on assignments with further contact.*

6. *Have you tended to find that any follow up on feedback is (please indicate any option that applies)*

Initiated by you

Initiated by the student

Sometimes by you, sometimes by the student

7. *Do you find that the type/effectiveness of feedback through the eTMA system is affected in any way if you have already established a dialogue with the student concerned, for example, via tutorial attendance or telephone conversation? Please highlight any statements below that apply.*

Yes, feedback is more effective if I have established a dialogue with the student already

Yes, my feedback can relate to the student's goals, if I have established a dialogue with the student already

No, the type/effectiveness of my feedback is not affected by having had any dialogue with the student

8. *Please try to provide an example to illustrate your answer to 7 above.*

9. *To your knowledge, have your students received any guidance/feedback on assignments from other sources (for example, from other students, friends, via social media?)*

No (please go to question 11)

Yes (please give details below)

10. *If you answered “yes” to the above, - have you found that such additional guidance is helpful?*

Yes (please explain below)

No (please explain below)

11. *Ideally, what would be your preferred situation within which to develop discussion on written feedback on assessed work? Please select one option below.*

Tutor group forum (for whole group)

Email (individual)

Face-to-face tutorial (group situation)

Illuminate tutorial (group situation)

Individual telephone discussion

Individual face-to-face session

Individual Illuminate session

None of these – prefer not to discuss feedback

*12. How far do you feel that feedback practices on U214 are specified by the Region and/or the module team?*

*13. How far do you feel that feedback practices on U214 are left to your own judgement?*

*14. Aside from comments already made, do you have any further thoughts and feelings about feedback practices on U214? If so, please explain below.*

*15. Would you be willing to participate in a brief telephone interview with me to follow up points made on this questionnaire at a convenient time in the near future? (Please state either YES or NO below. I do have your email address but please let me know of any other contact details if you wish. I shall, of course, keep these confidentially.)*

**END OF QUESTIONS**

Thank you very much for your help.

Jane Cobb

## Appendix 4.6: Semi-structured interview script: tutors

### Follow-up to tutor questionnaire:

**Proposed questions for semi-structured telephone interviews with selected tutors who have agreed to telephone interviews as part of a questionnaire response.**

*Questions are intended to follow up and encourage development of points made within questionnaire responses.*

#### Initially

1. Confirm the type of questions that will be asked (outlined in an email) and the length of the interview – about 20 minutes but 30 minutes maximum and to check that tutor is comfortable with this
2. Check that it is acceptable that the interview will be recorded (if not, that it is acceptable to make notes instead)
3. To reassure that:
  - a. the data will be kept confidentially
  - b. the data will only be used for the research purposes outlined
  - c. the tutor will not be identified with their data
  - d. the tutor can back out at any time before the data is written up.
4. To check that tutor has my contact details for the above purpose.

#### Main questions:

(First question – same as first question to students, follow up Q. 2 = different)

5. ***As I mentioned, most of the questions I'm going to ask simply follow up points that you made when you completed the questionnaire. However, I'd like to start with an extra question. I wonder what you understand by 'academic writing'? – What does this mean to you?***

(Don't press this if the tutor finds it difficult to answer)

6. ***Thank you. And following on from this – what do you think are the really major issues about dialogue on feedback on academic writing?***

(Prompts: by dialogue – via any media [so feedback forms, email, telephone, tutorials, special sessions]. If find difficult to answer change to ...***what about feedback practices in general?***)

***Thank you. That's really helpful. All the rest of my questions refer to your comments on the questionnaire.***

(Questions to be asked selectively to tutors – according to responses – so some will not apply.)

- 7. You indicated that students tended to read/not read your comments thoroughly...(on...) – what do you think might get in the way of students taking on board your comments?***
- 8. You mentioned that you had followed up feedback with some dialogue in x circumstance – how has this gone well? (...from your viewpoint)***
- 9. ..and what about anything that makes such situations difficult? (...from your viewpoint)***

Note: initial experience of Pilot is that Q. 9 is answered in the above discussion – so don't ask again if this is the case.

- 10. And I wonder if you can think of an example when discussing (email/telephone/face to face – whatever) your comments with a student might mean you change your mind – I mean when (if) you get to see the situation from their point of view?***
- 11. You mention advice students received from (another source x) and this (was/was not) helpful. Can you say any more about this?***
- 12. I'm interested in your comments about how far feedback practices are specified by x (follow up specific points)***
- 13. You make some final points at the end of the questionnaire about (x) – can you say a bit more about (x)?***
- 14. Finally, is there anything more you would like to say about dialogue on feedback practices on academic writing?***

Finally

- 15. Thank you very much for your time and trouble which is much appreciated. Before we finish, do you have any questions at all about the research?***
- 16. Would you like me to keep in touch about findings generally?***

Turn off the recording and tell the tutor that you have done so.

Jane Cobb

## Appendix 5: Institutional perspectives: data collection

### Appendix 5.1: Central academic: questionnaire

*Thank you very much for agreeing to help with my research by completing this questionnaire on your perspectives on feedback practices for U214<sup>47</sup>. As explained in my previous email message, I am studying towards my Doctorate in Education and I am undertaking this research as part of this qualification. As you know, I am also an Associate Lecturer on U214 -----<sup>48</sup>and I want to base my research on this module. I am particularly interested in multiple perspectives on dialogue about feedback on academic study and assignments in this module – what practices exist and what is valued by students, tutors and representatives of the institution<sup>49</sup>.*

*Please try to answer in relation to your role in relation to U214. It is important to me to emphasise that I am not making any value judgements about practices and approaches of any of the participants involved in the feedback process. Further, I want to assure you that when I write up my research, you will not be identified with your comments.*

*Please answer the following questions. Some of the questions are open ones and require just a short response which I request that you insert below my question. You might wish to use a different font or capitals. Other questions are closed and require you to highlight (or to indicate in another way) which option best suits your situation. Please feel free to make any further comments, if you wish. I estimate that the questionnaire will take no more than 15 minutes to complete.*

*Please then send your completed questionnaire back to me via email at:*

[r.j.cobb@open.ac.uk](mailto:r.j.cobb@open.ac.uk)

*Do contact me if you have any queries or concerns about this research, either at the above email address or by telephone on 07970955297.*

### **QUESTIONS**

**The first questions are about feedback on assignments through the eTMA<sup>50</sup> system**

1. *Generally, do you think that students read feedback comments that tutors make on their assignments?*

Yes, thoroughly

---

<sup>47</sup> Note for Appendices: Numerical code used for the studied module, *Worlds of English*

<sup>48</sup> Note for Appendices: Location omitted to protect the identity of participants

<sup>49</sup> Note for Appendices: This term was originally used but was later changed to ‘central academics’

<sup>50</sup> Note for Appendices: Accepted institutional abbreviation for ‘electronic tutor marked assignment’



Yes, but just glance at them

No

2. *What type of feedback do you perceive is most effective? Try to give one specific example but please do not mention a particular student or tutor.*
3. *Would you **expect** a tutor to follow up feedback on a student's eTMA cover sheet/script comments with any further contact? **Please indicate the most appropriate response from the choice below.***

Yes regularly

Yes but not in every case

No

4. *If you chose either of the two "yes" responses to the above question, please provide one example of a particular circumstance in which you might expect a tutor to follow up written feedback with further contact:*

**The next questions concern information/guidance/feedback about assessed work that students might receive from other sources:**

5. *Do you think that students receive any guidance/feedback on assignments from other sources (for example, from other students, friends, via social media?)*

No (please go to question 7)

Yes (please give brief details below)

6. *If you answered "yes" to the above, - do you think that such additional guidance is helpful, generally?*

Yes (please explain below, if you wish)

No (please explain below, if you wish)

7. *Ideally, what do you consider would be the most effective context within which to develop discussion on written feedback on assessed work? Please select one of the options listed below.*

Tutor group forum (for whole group)

Email (individual)

Face-to-face tutorial (group situation)

OU Live<sup>51</sup> tutorial (group situation)

Individual telephone discussion

Individual face-to-face session

Individual OU Live session

None of these – the comments on the feedback form should be sufficient

The following questions concern the extent to which feedback practices are specified.

8. *On a scale of 1 - 5, 1 being not at all and 5 being very much so –*

8.1 *How far do you feel that feedback practices on U214 are specified by the **Region**?*

1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5

8.2 *How far do you feel that feedback practices on U214 are specified by the **module team**?*

1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5

8.3 *How far do you feel that feedback practices on U214 are specified by **the University's** regulations and procedures?*

1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5

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<sup>51</sup> Note for Appendices: system for an online tutorial

**8.4** *How far do you feel that feedback practices on U214 are left to an **individual tutor's** own judgement?*

1 – 2 – 3 – 4 - 5

**8.5** *How far do you feel that feedback practices on U214 are dependent on the responses of an **individual student**?*

1 – 2 – 3 – 4 - 5

**Any further comments?**

**9** *Aside from comments already made, do you have any further thoughts and feelings about feedback practices on U214? If so, please explain below.*

**Further participation?**

**10** *Would you be willing to participate in a brief (recorded) telephone interview with me to follow up points made on this questionnaire at a convenient time in the near future? (Please state either YES or NO below. I do have your email address but please let me know of any other contact details if you wish and perhaps a convenient time to contact you.)*

**END OF QUESTIONS**

Thank you very much for your help.

Jane Cobb

## Appendix 5.2: Central academic: semi-structured interview script

(Follow up to questionnaire for two of the three central academics)<sup>52</sup>

### **Proposed questions for semi-structured telephone interviews with selected central academics who have agreed to being interviewed.**

*Questions are intended to follow up and encourage development of points made within questionnaire responses.*

#### Initially

1. Confirm the type of questions that will be asked (outlined in an email) and the length of the interview – about 20 minutes but 30 minutes maximum and to check that the interviewee is comfortable with this
2. Check that it is acceptable that the interview will be recorded (if not acceptable, to make notes instead)
3. To reassure that:
  - a. the data will be kept confidentially
  - b. the data will only be used for the research purposes outlined
  - c. the interviewee will not be identified with their data
  - d. the interviewee can withdraw at any time before the data is written up.
4. To check that the interviewee has my contact details for the above purpose.

#### Main questions:

(First question – same as first question to students and tutors; the follow up Q. 2 is the same as the question to tutors)

- 5. *As I mentioned, most of the questions I'm going to ask simply follow up points that you made when you completed the questionnaire. However, I'd like to start with an extra question. I wonder what you understand by 'academic writing'? – What does this mean to you?***

(Don't press this if the interviewee finds it difficult to answer)

- 6. *Thank you. And following on from this – what do you think are the really major issues about dialogue on feedback on academic writing?***

---

<sup>52</sup> Note for Appendices: As only two central academics completed questionnaires – but all three were interviewed.

(Prompts: by dialogue – via any media [so feedback forms, email, telephone, tutorials, special sessions]. If find difficult to answer change to ...***what about feedback practices in general?***)

***Thank you. That's really helpful. All the rest of my questions refer to your comments on the questionnaire.***

(Questions to be asked selectively to interviewees, according to responses – so some will not apply.)

- 7. You indicated that students do/do not generally read feedback comments that tutors make on their assignments – what do you think might get in the way of students taking on board tutors' comments?***
- 8. You mentioned that you felt that (type of feedback) is particularly effective. Can you say a little more about that?***
- 9. You don't seem to think it is the responsibility of the tutor to follow up feedback/you think that the tutor should follow up feedback in x circumstance – (ask a question to develop what is suggested here)***
- 10. You felt that advice students might get from (other – or specify) sources is/is not helpful and suggested because...(ask to expand – 'can you say a little bit more about that'/ 'Why do you think this is the case?')***
- 11. I asked a series of questions on the questionnaire about how far feedback practices are specified and you seemed to suggest that (summarise what was indicated in the response scales)...Is that the case? (then try to make more specific about what is specified – 'Do you mean the amount...the grading...? although preferable if the aspect specified is mentioned without a prompt)***
- 12. You make some final points at the end of the questionnaire about (x) – can you say a bit more about (x)?***
- 13. Finally, is there anything more you would like to say about dialogue on feedback practices on academic writing?***

***At this point, agree to turn off the recorder and tell the interviewee that this has been done.***

Finally (unrecorded questions)

- 14. Thank you very much for your time and trouble which is much appreciated. Before we finish, do you have any questions at all about the research?***

Note also that with central academics it will be difficult to disguise identity if role titles are given. Agree what the interviewee is happy with. Assure that names will not be used. Also check that there

*is permission for information to be written up (with the exception of any names or mention of persons that might be identified).*

**Jane Cobb, August, 2014**

## Appendix 6: Ethical issues

### Appendix 6.1: Data protection questionnaire: response

Dear Jane,

Thank you for submitting a data protection questionnaire for your EdD project.

There aren't any special data protection issues with your project, but please anonymise the data as soon as possible.

Although you can use the raw data for further research projects, if you aren't planning to do any more research in this area, you should consider deleting the raw data when your project is complete.

I don't know what feedback you have had from SRPP or Ethics, but if your research is approved I advise you to make it clear to your tutor group that this research is for your own project towards your qualification and not part of OU 'institutional' research. Of course, if it is being sponsored by your faculty and is going to be used for institutional research, as long as you explain the dual purpose there should not be any problems.

Regards,

Beverley

Beverley Midwood

Senior Manager - Legislation and Information

University Secretary's Office

01908 653994

## Appendix 6.2: Student Research Project Panel (SRPP): decision

**Sent:** 23 August 2012 12:22 PM

**To:** R.J.Cobb

**Cc:** Theresa.Lillis; Research-Ethics; Stephanie.Lay

**Subject:** SRPP 2012/059 - Panel decision

Dear Jane

With reference to your recent Student Research Project Panel application 'A comparative investigation of multiple perspectives on dialogic feedback on academic writing', I am pleased to report that Panel approval has been given. The Panel have a small amount of feedback that hopefully you will find useful:

- **Invitation** - this is very good but you may wish to consider making the wording a little less formal and give an indication of how long the questionnaire will take to complete.
- **Questionnaire** – consider asking a question about what the preferred method of discussion is following on from Q6.
- **Follow-up request** – it would soften the request slightly if the word 'interview' was replaced with asking if students would be willing to take part in the telephone conversation.

We always inform applicants that panel approval does not imply either ethical or sample approval if either is required. In this instance SRPP have a note with regard to your HREC approval and Stephanie (Lay) will be in contact with regard to your sample. If you don't normally have access through your work role the student details will be passed to Theresa as I think we've discussed previously.

If you have any questions please don't hesitate to get back in touch.

With best regards

Jane



### Appendix 6.3: Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC): approval

Hi Jane,

Thanks for your email. Following the favourable opinion from SRPP, the HREC opinion is also favourable and this project does not require a further review by HREC, as it is judged to be of minimal risk.

Kind regards,  
Xiao  
(acting HREC secretary)

Received 4<sup>th</sup> September, 2012

## Appendix 7: Student questionnaire: analysis of closed questions

(With thanks to the Student Research Project Panel)

**Have you attended any U214 tutorials or a day school? (q1)**

**Have you attended any U214 tutorials or a day school?**

Yes, face to face tutorial / day school	22	47.8 %
Yes, tutorial via Elluminate <sup>53</sup>	7	15.2 %
No, I would have liked to attend but I wasn't able to	17	37.0 %
No, I don't find tutorials useful	2	4.3 %
Total	46	100.0 %

**Did you read the comments made by your tutor on the feedback form? (q3)**

**Did you read the comments made by your tutor on the feedback form?**

Yes, thoroughly	43	93.5 %
Yes, glanced at them	3	6.5 %
No	0	0.0 %
Total	46	100.0 %

**Did you read comments made by your tutor on your script? (q4)**

**Did you read comments made by your tutor on your script?**

Yes, thoroughly	42	91.3 %
Yes, glanced at them	3	6.5 %
No	1	2.2 %
Total	46	100.0 %

**Did you look back at your tutor's previous comments (on the script and/or on the feedback form) (q5)**

**Did you look back at your tutor's previous comments (on the script and/or on the feedback form) when preparing your most recent assignment?**

Yes	32	71.1 %
No	13	28.9 %
Total	45	100.0 %

**Have you ever discussed assignment feedback with your tutor on this module (U214)? (q6)**

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<sup>53</sup> Note for Appendices: A system used by the University at the time for online tutorials and for some student/tutor communications

**Have you ever discussed assignment feedback with your tutor on this module (U214)?**

Yes, by telephone, initiated by me	1	2.2 %
Yes, by telephone, initiated by my tutor	0	0.0 %
Yes, by email, initiated by me	12	26.7 %
Yes, by email, initiated by my tutor	3	6.7 %
Yes, at an additional face to face session	1	2.2 %
Yes, during a tutorial	2	4.4 %
Yes, via the tutor group forum	2	4.4 %
No	32	71.1 %
Total	45	100.0 %

**Preferred method for any discussion of assignment feedback with your tutor (q7)**

**What would be your preferred method for any discussion of assignment feedback with your tutor?**

Telephone	5	11.1 %
Email	20	44.4 %
Face to face (individual)	12	26.7 %
Face to face (at a tutorial)	7	15.6 %
Tutor group forum	0	0.0 %
Prefer not to discuss feedback with my tutor	1	2.2 %
Total	45	100.0 %

**Have you ever received any guidance, advice, support or feedback on any aspect of assignments from any other source, other than from your tutor? (q8)**

**Have you ever received any guidance, advice, support or feedback on any aspect of assignments from any other source, other than from your tutor (either before or after you submitted your TMA to your tutor)?**

Yes, from a student adviser	1	2.2 %
Yes, from another member of Open University staff	1	2.2 %
Yes, from another student on my module at a tutorial session	0	0.0 %
Yes, from another student on my module, other than at a tutorial session	1	2.2 %
Yes, from a friend who is not studying my module	6	13.3 %

Yes, from a family member who is not studying my module	5	11.1 %
Yes, via social media (e.g. Facebook)	5	11.1 %
No	33	73.3 %
Total	45	100.0 %

Was this advice (mentioned in your response to the previous question) from: (q10)

Was this advice (mentioned in your response to the previous question) from:

Your tutor:	37	84.1 %
Another person:	6	13.6 %
Another source e.g. book/internet:	5	11.4 %
Total	44	100.0 %

Why did you think that the advice mentioned was not helpful? (q11a)

Why did you think that the advice mentioned was not helpful?

I did not understand what my tutor meant:	6	16.7 %
The advice did not relate to my study goals:	0	0.0 %
I don't know:	2	5.6 %
Another reason:	14	38.9 %
Total	36	100.0 %

Did you manage to obtain the advice mentioned in your response to the previous question from another source? (q12a)

Did you manage to obtain the advice mentioned in your response to the previous question from another source?

Yes	4	11.8 %
No	30	88.2 %
Total	34	100.0 %

Would you be willing to participate in a brief telephone conversation? (q13)

Would you be willing to participate in a brief telephone conversation to follow up points made on this questionnaire at a convenient time after 10th October?

Yes	31	70.5 %
No	13	29.5 %
Total	44	100.0 %

## Appendix 8: Semi-structured interviews: transcription key and decisions

Below is a transcription key used for all transcriptions.

<i>Italics</i>	Indicating non-verbal communication, such as laughter
(?)	inaudible utterance
...	Indicating omitted sections*
Underlining	Indicates emphasis, I <u>think</u> (used only when necessary to suggest meaning)
Square brackets [ ]	To replace/substitute either (i) a name of a person, to prevent identification, or (ii) an in-house technical term, for clarity, such as [assignment] for “TMA” <sup>54</sup> or (iii) “it” when the referent is unclear.

\*Ellipsis is used, for example, when quoting from transcriptions within chapters when minimal responses, such as “mmm” or “OK”, from the interviewer or hesitation markers (“er”/“erm”) are considered irrelevant to the point illustrated.

All transcriptions and quotations contain conventional punctuation, for ease of reading; question marks are used when rising intonation indicated an interrogative phrase.

Within transcriptions in the Appendices, the passage of time is indicated in five-minute intervals, as

**- 10 minutes -**

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<sup>54</sup> Tutor Marked Assignment

## Appendix 9: Sample student interview transcription: John

*Note: See Appendix 8 for transcription key and decisions*

*JANE = Interviewer/researcher*

*JOHN = Student interviewee*

JANE: Erm OK now as I mentioned then most of the questions I'm going to ask simply follow up points that you made when you completed the questionnaire

JOHN: OK

JANE: You don't have to remember them, OK. However, I'd like to start with an extra question. (*sound of telephone ringing – loud and intrusive*) Oh sorry that's my 'phone

JOHN: OK, no problem

(*Pause in the interview while the telephone rang and went silent*)

JANE: Right that's it. However, I'd like to start with an extra question.

JOHN: Oh OK.

JANE: I wonder what you understand by academic writing? And what does this mean to you?

JOHN: Oh that's interesting. Academic writing. Erm personally erm I see it as a sort of a fairly broad erm group of generic forms of writing

JANE: Mmmm

JOHN: Which are distinguished I think by a degree of formality

JANE: Yes

JOHN: erm the use of erm register based terminology

JANE: Mmmm

JOHN: and I erm suppose within the formality and and er refraining from casual casual terms terminology erm often often I think that it's used in a way which had argument erm so it's a form of the language itself and the formality of the language and the purpose to which it's used in being perhaps analytical and argumentative. I don't think I've missed anything.

JANE: Right. No. Thank you. Thank you very much for that. And er and that's that's great and and following on from this, what do you think are the really major issues about dialogue on feedback on academic writing? By dialogue I mean any any any communication, though so I would include feedback forms, emails, telephone tutorials, special sessions, etcetera

JOHN: Well I think erm the the issue is from the point of view of U214 er can I look at it in that way?

JANE: Of course. I'd like you to. Yes, thank you, yes

JOHN: U214 U214<sup>55</sup> Erm the the U214 the biggest issues that I come up against I think is the the one of so many students come from er a humanities background where erm there there is they are I don't know if they're encouraged to but I came from an humanities background myself at one point

JANE: Mmmmm

JOHN: and I er did quite a bit with literature and er there's a difference in style erm I think because the study the subjects of study in humanities are often one that one could call literary English and I er a rather literary style of of academic writing is perhaps acceptable

JANE: Yes

JOHN: and er I think even encouraged I can remember as a student being encouraged in my tendency to be literary in my style, rather purple at times erm and also to quote heavily from from study texts, whereas that's not really the best approach erm with linguistics which is really a kind of social science I see it as a social science

JANE: Right

JOHN: more than leaning towards the literary

JANE: Right

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<sup>55</sup> Note for Appendices: The numerical code for the studied module, *Worlds of English*

JOHN: and erm and that's one of the big issues that comes up with students and being able to gently direct them towards being more scientific in their approach and less erm figurative is is er is probably probably the major thing with a substantial proportion of students so but to to be able to do that without discouraging them

JANE: Right

- 5 minutes -

JOHN: Is is an issue. I mean I had one student who was erm a moderate student he was borderline I suppose was upper three lower two who started off an essay where a part of the question included the term "word" and it and it kind of called probably for some sort of definition of that

JANE: Yes

JOHN: and quoted the the entire first three verses of the Gospel of St. John in ancient Greek to er show how much he knew about that and didn't actually explain how he was going to define the term "word"

JANE: Right

JOHN: within his answer

JANE: Oh

JOHN: and and that's typical of the sort of thing that happens with with many students. Does that cover what?

JANE: Yes, yes that's really helpful there's so many things I'd like to pick up on on that. One thing you said I remember you just said is the problem is how to direct students without well without sort of putting them off is that what you said or?

JOHN: Yes, yes it's it's being constructive

JANE: being constructive

JOHN: without undermining them

JANE: Right



JOHN: because different students have different levels of sensitivity to that I think

JANE: Right

JOHN: and it's striking the you don't necessarily know what sort of student you've got initially do you?

JANE: No

JOHN: You don't know if you've got the "hit me with everything you've got er I love being told what to do" and or the

JANE: Right (*laughs*)

JOHN: "I think I'm very good already" and er you know "you'll knock me off my pedestal" type of student. You don't really know initially which one you've got

JANE: No

JOHN: or where they are in-between (*laughs*)

JANE: Right er yes or what sort of thing will knock them off their pedestal and what will be yeah (*laughs*) well or what sort of criticism they can take. Yeah OK and regarding your your comments, you were surprised well I was surprised, you actually thought that most students didn't read them? Was that most students or students didn't read your comments?

JOHN: Er yeah I think that is what I said, isn't it? I think I said that. That's erm It's my belief that a substantial proportion don't read them very much and I'll confess that very often I didn't I didn't read my own feedback when erm I was a student at times and that was really forced on me it wasn't really that I wasn't interested it was a time issue

JANE: I see

JOHN: Erm but I know that a lot of students don't erm some clearly don't because I've I've had students where I've made the same comment three times, something quite important, and it's it's only when I've I've on one or two occasions translated that into a fairly severe approach to marking the next assignment that I've had a reaction and it's er

JANE: Oh

JOHN: And it's been clear that they've not read what I've told them before

JANE: So

JOHN: that's only a few I think are that bad but I think that scant attention is often paid. Many do read it and I do get students come back with a list of questions sometimes based on the feedback I've given them

JANE: So a "severe"

JOHN: but that's rarer

JANE: a severer approach to the next assignment would be in terms of the mark or in comments?

JOHN: Erm well I think both really I mean I think where we are is in the area of er I'm thinking of things like referencing

JANE: Yes

JOHN: Where I've I've where I've had a student who has not referenced very well or perhaps not even referenced at all but there's been clear use of texts and that's not been plagiarized and er clear use of course material and er any stages will point this out and expect that that will produce a reaction

JANE: Mmmmm

JOHN: And and it doesn't happen the next time so erm mention it again and erm you know hope that they'll you know pick it up this time, point it out that they've been told previously and er on the third occasion I've once or twice failed something which probably you know it it wouldn't have failed if had it been a first assignment but

JANE: No

JOHN: But having having not responded to something which is basic

JANE: Yes

JOHN: Where someone could say well if it's not referenced erm I've I've got no idea of the prominence of the material in it

JANE: Yes

JOHN: You've not demonstrated that. In theory it's failed on the 'academic convention' criterion

JANE: Right

JOHN: But I wouldn't normally do that erm but the the when you're like the third assignment then then perhaps I should and I've done that to make a point on occasion on rare occasions I haven't done it very often

JANE: Right

JOHN: But then then you get a response and then you find that the fourth one is properly referenced (*laughs*)

JANE: Yes

JOHN: But they've obviously not read the feedback on previous occasions

JANE: Yes. Do you think it's a case of not reading it or or not taking it on board or or

JOHN: Phew well

JANE: And is it just reading?

JOHN: Well it's difficult to tell, isn't it? I think

JANE: Yeah

JOHN: I suppose an in-depth discussion on it would erm would have revealed that but again I don't like to be that inquisitorial

JANE: No

JOHN: I suppose a long conversation with "Well did you read my feedback?" would have produced an answer to that. I I haven't gone to those lengths normally but erm so I'm not necessarily sure whether it was one or the other. I'm making assumptions, really.

JANE: Right

JOHN: Here

JANE: Right. Well we have to, don't we? Sometimes

- 10 minutes -

JOHN: Yeah (*laughs*)

JANE: You say you've not gone into long discussions. Would you ever be in there ever a situation where you would discuss feedback in any other way than on the forum, I mean sort of 'phone a student?

JOHN: Oh er yes I mean and that has happened what what I normally find I mean I expect because it's the protocol I expect that erm students will read what I've what I've written in my feedback so I don't assume that a first that a first measure that that face to face or you know telephone conversation is required because I think it's their responsibility to read their feedback and if they

JANE: Yes

JOHN: If they've got a problem then they should they should be ringing me.

JANE: Yes.

JOHN: That's that's my immediate approach.

JANE: Yes.

JOHN: So that yes I mean there have been occasions when I've I've initiated telephone discussions on on issues of feedback but usually I've found it's the other way round. Usually it's the it's they want to speak to me because usually they're not happy at what I've said. (*laughs*) Only it doesn't happen very often but that's er normally how the direct conversation or or of course in tutorials where there's usually a small queue at the end of tutorials, isn't there?

JANE: Yeah there is

JOHN: To discuss issues and then of course you get usually a much less confrontational discussion, I find that people are happier with sort of more low key and casual enquiries in that situation

JANE: In that situation because I'm also I think you said the preferred way to develop discussion of feedback would actually be the tutor group forum for the whole group?

JOHN: Well yes I mean I think er yeah yeah and that's where erm I I prefer to present the if you like the more er er the more controversial types of criticism erm that might people might find undermining or or or confrontational I I prefer to do it that way rather than directly. Er I would be lower key in direct feedback er because er again I'm concerned about the sensitivity of individual students. It's much easier on the forum to be er hypothetical

JANE: Because it's

JOHN: Er

JANE: General to everybody and not particularly to individuals?

JOHN: That's that's right and in fact in my life outside of linguistics

JANE: Oh

JOHN: I I actually teach and judge. I teach ballroom dancing and I judge competitions

JANE: Do you?

JOHN: And I I write reports for dance press. And now it's common in that genre for the the report writing it's common for people to try to give dance lessons in public in the paper so they'll say you know "John and Julie should be doing this or that" and

JANE: Yes

JOHN: And personally I try to avoid that I because I er people find that a bit confrontational. I much prefer you know to say "I noticed this type of problem"

JANE: Yes

JOHN: "at this event" (*laughs*)

JANE: Yes

JOHN:           you don't necessarily have to name the er individual although they may get the hint that it's them or that they're one of the offenders by something maybe slightly more off set that might relate to them

JANE:           But they

JOHN:           But I prefer to do it that way and I find the tutor forum quite good in that way

JANE:           Right

JOHN:           That that you can cover the you know sort of general kind of thoughts like you know the advice in the question guidance to make apparent your your knowledge of the course "doesn't mean string together a lot of long quotes from the" er (*laughs*)

JANE:           Right

JOHN:           You can say that

JANE:           Yes

JOHN:           To the whole group

JANE:           You can say that to the whole group and then the "offending"

JOHN:           Yes

JANE:           Individuals won't be exposed

JOHN:           Yes

JANE:           Because they're

JOHN:           That's right, yeah.

JANE:           Yes. OK. And you mention "easy win" those are your words "easy win topics" like referencing er but so where you may you know get some improvement in referencing and they may take erm note of your comments. What's not "easy win"? What sort of er sort of aspects aren't an easy win?

JOHN:           Oh what sort of issues are not easy win?

JANE:           Yeah

JOHN: Well I think sort of students general use of English is is harder, isn't it?  
Erm

JANE: Right

- 15 minutes (approx.) -

JOHN: You because I upset somebody once at a tutor seminar. It It was really because I suppose people read different things into different into different statements but er I I can remember saying in a group of tutors that it wasn't our job to teach people to speak English and what I meant by that (*laughs*) was (*laughs*) that er if they don't speak English sufficiently well to take the course they they probably shouldn't have signed up for it and I didn't mean that it wasn't our job to help them where we can to improve

JANE: Ah yeah

JOHN: Particularly academically

JANE: Yeah

JOHN: but another tutor said "oh well that's er er I thoroughly think it is our job to teach them English"

JANE: Mmmm

JOHN: And we were talking about two different things

JANE: Yes

JOHN: The phrase if you like "to teach English" was polysemous?? Er I I what I meant by it was that it wasn't a course it wasn't a course specifically on speaking the English language or or even on using academic English *per se* it was a course on the subject and those things were peripheral to it and so we help we can but we can't we can't turn ourselves into an ESOL teacher

JANE: Right

JOHN: And er there isn't time

JANE: There isn't time. No. Yeah OK yeah because there

JOHN: So so I think what I'm getting by that is what I mean by that is the the one of the "not an easy wins" is for instance typically the er er non L1 English you know student whose English is er shaky you can do a certain amount with with er in your feedback but maybe a total deconstruction of their use of English throughout their essay each time would put us way beyond the amount of time we are paid for

JANE: Right

JOHN: For each assignment

JANE: Yes

JOHN: So you can only do so much and also we would probably undermine some students who would feel that you were then perhaps erm focusing too much on their use of English which they possibly thought was not bad

JANE: Right

JOHN: So to you know the judgement it's a judgement call with that you know, isn't it?

JANE: Yes it is a judgement call and I appreciate what you are saying. Constraints on tutor time are something that you did you did a point that you did make later in the questionnaire you said well you said I asked for general comments (*laughs*) and you said, "I mean it's a good system given the constraints on tutor time". Would that That is an issue, isn't it? Do you think?

JOHN: I think it is really because I think it's fair to say that there is a relatively high incidence I think of tutors giving more time than they are paid. I think that in the main Open University ALs give more time than they are paid for.

JANE: I agree.

JOHN: They will spend you know several hours over an assignment that they are paid forty minutes to work on

JANE: Forty minutes, yes

JOHN: Or something like that and that works tolerably well particularly where people have small numbers of students and they are very interested in their subject erm but er it it starts to you notice to the creaks in the joints when student numbers increase



JANE: Yes

JOHN: And you are forced back on to time limits which are nearer to the realistic ones

JANE: Right

JOHN: Erm so I think I think the system that we've got properly used it does enable a sort of workmanlike appraisal within the timescales that we've got

JANE: Right and

JOHN: I think it's quite good for that and I particularly like on well on U214<sup>56</sup> and on the preceding course I think the assessment criteria are very very helpful.

JANE: Yes I do too.

JOHN: I couldn't appreciate them at first erm but but I've come to realise that they are really, really helpful in a world where you've got to be analytical but in fact ultimately the answer is informed subject the answers are based on student appraisal, if you like er er not student tutor appraisal

JANE: Yes

JOHN: Of students' work is informed subjectivity if you like. Ultimately erm if one makes an holistic judgement based on various evidence and being able to quantify that and feel confident that you've made the right decision erm is it would be very difficult without the assessment criteria I think. They are really helpful.

JANE: Yes. You mentioned that. Great. The other thing that you did actually we we you were discussing on the questionnaire about consistency marking and you mentioned and other tutors have done too the importance of the monitor erm

**- 20 minutes -**

JOHN: Oh right yes. Oh right I do find monitoring very helpful.

JANE: Right.

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<sup>56</sup> Note for Appendices: code for the studied module, *Worlds of English*

JOHN: I think that's what I said but I can't remember now (*laughs*).

JANE: Well no you know, yes in terms of consistency of marking erm but you mentioned the monitor the monitor came up as important but also in consistency of marking you said it was a good thing that you were left to your own judgements quite a bit as well that's the other thing you mentioned

JOHN: Yes, yes I think so and I think that's a feature of the OU approach. I mean I don't know how other Universities approach things. I suspect they may be similar but I I've realised that the er approach that the OU has certainly on the courses that I've taught anyway that perhaps giving guidance that has allowed tutors to form their own opinions erm about what's important for given TMAs<sup>57</sup> or whatever is probably the best workable approach

JANE: Right

JOHN: Mmmm because there are so many potential answers to every question and one can't legislate for all the possibilities

JANE: No

JOHN: No any more rigid system would inevitably erm eliminate and and it would impact adversely on answers which actually were very good but that actually didn't fit the pre-formulation that

JANE: Right

JOHN: That perhaps would be too rigid, so I think the flexibility that we have is actually very helpful

JANE: Right. Thank you. That's Thank you very much. Now actually we've gone over twenty minutes. It's twenty-two minutes and I would if it's OK like to ask you one extra question (*laughs*)

JOHN: Oh yeah, yeah, it's no problem at all

JANE: OK. Just one more question. It's actually not really following up much from the questionnaire because I've asked you about we we well what you've just said you talked about what perhaps feeds into the way that you approach feedback – the ballroom dancing and that you don't want to be intrusive. What what about what do you think may feed into the way students or the sort of oh let's say other er input into

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<sup>57</sup> Note for Appendices: A much-used abbreviation for 'tutor marked assignments'

feedback students might have. I was thinking particularly in my own head about social media. You said that you don't have any particular incidences of students using that. I know that other tutors have and have put it on the forum. Is there anything that you think will impact er social media any friends anything any other impact that students have into their work besides your own feedback.

JOHN: Erm well I'm aware. I can't remember now what I said about social media.

JANE: You said it wasn't an issue. You just said it wasn't an issue.

JOHN: Ah well I see well I I may well very often when you are filling in questionnaires you only have a set range of answers

JANE: Yes, yes, yes I mean it was a question I asked because it does seem to come up a lot on the tutor forum people say, "Oh look you know it's something on Facebook" or "Farcebook" or whatever they call it

JOHN: Yes

JANE: But I I not finding it at all to be honest and I just wondered what you felt about that?

JOHN: Yes

JANE: But not just social media but any other input that students might students seem to have into their own feedback you know other people other other telling them what's going to get marks, etcetera

JOHN: Oh I think there is certainly there is an element I think that and I can believe that it is possible have been unfortunate to have experienced a strong influence from social media with with particular groups maybe. I know that there are forums out there where students are able to communicate about the course and that myths develop out of that. And I sometimes see evidence of that. I I do get students come to me sometimes that I've been told I've got to use eleven point but only whatever and er and I've got to do two and a half line spacing or whatever

JANE: Yes

JOHN: And I have to go and dispraise them of that and clearly that's come from some sort of media contact somewhere

JANE: Right

JOHN: But I just don't think it hasn't been for me a huge issue

JANE: No

JOHN: But I think that they do use social media erm they're in the main they're getting younger now of course. The demographic the student demographic now is proportionately younger now than it used to be when I started there were a lot of people of my age and maybe the majority of students were my age then and now the majority of students now are in their twenties and thirties

- 25 minutes -

JANE: That's true, yeah I find that too, yeah

JOHN: And they're all social media users

JANE: I find it has been used quite positively (*laughs*)

JOHN: Yes

JANE: For support erm whereas we haven't got that much time for support, have we?

JOHN: Yeah

JANE: Really So support from elsewhere but this is something that obviously not you know this is my own take on it but I'm quite interested in what other people are you know thinking about it. That's I don't want to that's been really helpful. Thank you very much. I don't have any more specific questions

JOHN: Oh

JANE: But is there any more you want to say about erm about dialogue on feedback practices on academic writing?

JOHN: Erm well you mean in a general sense?

JANE: Well just anything else you wanted to say, really.

JOHN: Er well I can't think of anything specific but I am aware that that academic writing is a skill and I'm certainly aware that it's a skill that is not necessarily in good supply amongst students and you do see quite a bit of evidence of it and so I I suppose

that erm possibly er maybe some formal input on it wouldn't not necessarily be a bad thing but whether that's whether that's a er an issue for for our course I'm I'm not so sure

JANE: Right

JOHN: But it would maybe a possibility erm because it's something that students do need to learn and I think because of the flexibility of the OU the very necessary flexibility it is it is possible for students that don't have particularly high levels of academic writing skills to be on on courses yeah above Level 1 it's quite easy for that to happen so if there were scope for something to be put on it possibly in a formal sense that would be possibly a nice thing

JANE: Right, yes

JOHN: I don't know whether that's helpful

JANE: That is, yes. That is something then a separate course from them being integrated into the module itself? Yes

JOHN: Yes

JANE: Yes

JOHN: Yes

JANE: OK thank you very much for all your time and trouble. Very much appreciated. And

JOHN: Oh well it's a pleasure. It's been it's been nice to take part so it's

JANE: Oh well

JOHN: It's my pleasure to help

JANE: Would you like me to keep in touch about findings generally? About my research? I mean I'm asking everyone that. Some students want me to.

JOHN: Yes, yes, of course

JANE: I'm not asking you to read my thesis (*laughs*)

JOHN: Yeah, yeah it would be lovely

JANE:           *(laughs)* No way you wouldn't want to do that but you know just about what happens, OK

JOHN:           Yes it would be very interesting. I think it's always nice to know erm particularly about things you're interested in yourself but it's very, very nice to know what's happening with other people I think and going back to monitoring I've often thought I've not myself been able to do any but erm I've always thought it must be a wonderful thing from the monitor's point of view to have that overview of what other people are doing it must be very helpful with their own work

JANE:           Yes

JOHN:           Because they're all tutors as well, aren't they?

JANE:           Yes

JOHN:           So having that idea of of what is happening elsewhere is so helpful I think generally in life and in other disciplines as well it must be really, really helpful it must be if you like being the Parish priest knowing everything that's going on

JANE:           Ah like being the Parish priest, yeah, like being the Parish priest, yeah

JOHN:           In sort of

JANE:           It must be. I agree. I'm not a monitor but I've spoken to tutors who are and that's what they say. Yes. Mmmm. Yeah.

JOHN:           But yes it would be really nice to get some feedback yeah not feedback but any information on how you're progressing would be really useful

JANE:           OK

JOHN:           And er I would find myself in er planning where I go my own sort of path, my academic path because I think there is a problem generally not just in the academic world there's a problem in in all erm all activities all groups erm people don't necessarily know things that they should know and they could know and they don't know that they don't know them

JANE:           Yes, right

JOHN:           And

JANE: And they don't know that they don't know them. I know what you mean.  
(*laughs*) Yes.

JOHN: (*laughs*) There's some people go on for years

JANE: Yes

JOHN: and there's some fundamental things that they have nobody had ever bothered to tell them

JANE: Yeah

JOHN: That it would have been really useful early on so some of your insights into the way the erm the er EdD and the MA work it it it are helpful and so

**- 30 minutes -**

JANE: OK

JOHN: And so any more information on your progress it would be nice to read your thesis

JANE: (*laughs*) Oh well thank you. I'm going to turn the tape recorder off now OK. When I've done that I just want to say one more thing about it. So I'm going to turn the recorder off now.

JOHN: OK.

**Interview duration: 30 minutes and 14 seconds**

## Appendix 10: Samples of official documentation

### Appendix 10.1: Sample assignment task

#### First assignment question with guidance notes

(From [online] Assessment Guide [2012a], Milton Keynes: The Open University)

### TMA<sup>58</sup> 01 (1000 words)

This TMA should be submitted via StudentHome using the University's electronic system before noon (UK local time) on **Monday 12 March 2012**.

**To what extent is modern-day English the same language as that introduced to the British Isles one and a half millennia ago?**

#### **Guidance notes**

[Please make sure that you have carefully read through the guidance on writing assignments before you begin, in particular the notes on referencing and avoiding plagiarism.] For this TMA you are being asked to write a short essay of approximately 1000 words discussing the development of the English language from its origins to the present day. In approaching the question, you should explain how the language has changed, making reference both to its form (i.e. its structure and appearance), and its uses. Given the significant change that has occurred to the language over the centuries, you will want to consider the ways in which there is continuity throughout its history, but also the ways in which the language today differs from earlier periods.

Although reference to the historical development of the language will be an important component of your answer, you should not concentrate solely on recounting the history of English. As you have relatively limited space for the essay, you are not expected to summarise the entire historical development of the language, but instead should be selective in picking out key issues that have affected its development, and should explain their significance. You should also include one or two linguistic examples to illustrate the changes.

Relevant material for your answer can be found in the General Introduction, and in Chapter 1 (especially Section 1.2) of the module book. You may also wish to make reference to issues relating to the history of the language that are discussed in Chapters 2, 3 and 4 of the book. Relevant material can also be found on the DVD, including Clips 1.2 (Varieties of English: poems and songs), 2.1 ('Original pronunciation' productions of Shakespeare), 3.1 (English in India), 3.2 (Jamaican

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<sup>58</sup> Tutor Marked Assignment



creole) and 3.3 (English in South Africa). You may also want to draw on Unit 4 of *English: A Linguistic Toolkit*, to find illustrative linguistic examples.

For this assignment you are being asked to write a formal essay, which means that you should write in distinct paragraphs, each focusing on a particular issue. It is also important that each of your points is supported with evidence, which should be appropriately referenced so that the sources can be identified by your tutor.

## Appendix 10.2: Marking criteria/grid

U214 marking grid						
	Relevance to question set	Knowledge and understanding of U214 material	Use of linguistic evidence	Construction of academic argument	Approach to alternative explanations and arguments	Clear expression and use of academic conventions
<b>Pass 1</b>	Sustained focus on the question; evidence of intellectual engagement with the question.	Excellent knowledge and understanding, effectively deployed.	Arguments always well supported by excellent selection of linguistic evidence; excellent analysis/ interpretation	Well structured, coherent and persuasive argument; consistently supported by appropriately integrated evidence.	Excellent, balanced discussion of alternative explanations/ arguments; evidence of independent critical engagement with ideas.	Very clear expression; all sources of evidence appropriately acknowledged and referenced.
<b>Pass 2</b>	Clear focus on the question and clear overall direction of answer.	Good knowledge and understanding; appropriate use of a good range of relevant material.	Arguments well supported by appropriate linguistic evidence; good analysis/interpretation	Clearly structured argument; assertions supported by evidence.	Good discussion of alternative explanations/ arguments.	Clear expression; sources of evidence generally appropriately acknowledged and referenced.
<b>Pass 3</b>	Generally clear focus on the question.	Generally draws competently on the most relevant material.	Arguments usually supported by appropriate linguistic evidence; analysis adequate and interpretations justified	Generally clear argument, supported by adequate evidence.	Recognition, and some limited discussion, of alternative explanations/ arguments.	Generally clear expression; adequate acknowledgement and referencing of sources.
<b>Pass 4</b>	Able to identify and address main issues raised by the question.	Basic understanding of material; some omissions and/or misunderstandings.	Arguments not always supported by relevant linguistic evidence; analysis and interpretation basic	Lines of argument may be clear for short sections but not sustained or developed; supporting evidence thin.	Heavily descriptive; little acknowledgement of alternative explanations/ arguments	Generally coherent expression; some attempt at acknowledgement and referencing of sources.
<b>Bare fail</b>	Some relevant material but fails to address the question consistently or adequately.	Weak understanding or inadequate knowledge of material.	Little linguistic evidence; insufficiently detailed discussion of data; significant errors of analysis and/or interpretation	Slight and/or poorly organised argument; inadequately supported by evidence.	Almost totally descriptive; little acknowledgement of alternative explanations/ arguments.	Not well expressed; poor acknowledgement of sources.
<b>Fail</b>	Frequently loses sight of the question and/or does not demonstrate understanding of the question.	Very little from module or fundamental misunderstandings.	Very little linguistic evidence; insufficiently detailed discussion of data; frequent errors of analysis; interpretations barely justified	Very weakly argued and evidenced.	Virtually no acknowledgement of alternative explanations/ arguments.	Serious deficiencies in expression and/or acknowledgement of sources.
<b>Bad fail</b>	No, or very little, evidence of exposure to U214 material.	Material mostly irrelevant to the question.	No evidence of engagement with linguistic data	Little attempt at argument; no supporting evidence for claims.	No acknowledgement of alternative explanations/ arguments.	Little written or not in full sentences; no acknowledgement of sources.

## Appendix 11: Ivanič's (2004) six discourses underpinning approaches to academic writing

Discourses	Layer in the comprehensive view of language	Beliefs about writing	Beliefs about learning to write	Approaches to the teaching of writing	Assessment criteria
1. A SKILLS DISCOURSE	THE WRITTEN TEXT ▲	Writing consists of applying knowledge of sound-symbol relationships and syntactic patterns to construct a text.	Learning to write involves learning sound-symbol relationships and syntactic patterns.	SKILLS APPROACHES <i>Explicit teaching</i> 'phonics'	accuracy
2. A CREATIVITY DISCOURSE		Writing is the product of the author's creativity.	You learn to write by writing on topics which interest you.	CREATIVE SELF-EXPRESSION <i>Implicit teaching</i> 'whole language' 'language experience'	interesting content and style
3. A PROCESS DISCOURSE	THE MENTAL PROCESSES OF WRITING	Writing consists of composing processes in the writer's mind, and their practical realization.	Learning to write includes learning both the mental processes and the practical processes involved in composing a text.	THE PROCESS APPROACH <i>Explicit teaching</i>	?
4. A GENRE DISCOURSE	THE WRITING EVENT ▼	Writing is a set of text-types, shaped by social context.	Learning to write involves learning the characteristics of different types of writing which serve specific purposes in specific contexts.	THE GENRE APPROACH <i>Explicit teaching</i>	appropriacy
5. A SOCIAL PRACTICES DISCOURSE		Writing is purpose-driven communication in a social context.	You learn to write by writing in real-life contexts, with real purposes for writing.	FUNCTIONAL APPROACHES <i>Explicit teaching</i> PURPOSEFUL COMMUNICATION <i>Implicit teaching</i> 'communicative language teaching' LEARNERS AS ETHNOGRAPHERS <i>Learning from research</i>	effectiveness for purpose
6. A SOCIOPOLITICAL DISCOURSE	THE SOCIOCULTURAL AND POLITICAL CONTEXT OF WRITING	Writing is a sociopolitically constructed practice, has consequences for identity, and is open to contestation and change.	Learning to write includes understanding why different types of writing are the way they are, and taking a position among alternatives.	CRITICAL LITERACY <i>Explicit teaching</i> 'Critical Language Awareness'	social responsibility?

Figure 2 Discourses of writing and learning to write

## Appendix 12: ‘Academic writing’ question and responses

### Appendix 12.1: Transcription key: ‘academic writing’ responses

**See the general key in *Appendix 8*.** Again, usual punctuation is used for ease of reading. Question marks are inserted when rising tones indicate questions. However, here, pauses and hesitation markers, such as “er”/”erm” are not indicated, as labelling such is not considered necessary for the purposes of this analysis of content.

The responses contain ellipsis (...) to indicate that a section is missing. This is for the following reasons:

- most of the time, this is a minimal response (“Ah, I see”, “OK”) from the interviewer;
- just occasionally, it is because the interviewer is side-tracked or asks me to repeat phrases considered superfluous to the purpose of this transcription;
- on odd occasions too, the interviewee returns to the subject of academic writing and I’ve then included this later comment, if it is not taken out of context – i.e. attached to a response to an unrelated question.

## Appendix 12.2: Semi-structured interview question: academic writing

***Question to all: As I mentioned, most of the questions I'm going to ask simply follow up points that you made when you completed the questionnaire. However, I'd like to start with an extra question. I wonder what you understand by 'academic writing'? - What does this mean to you?***

***For students: Don't press this if the student finds it difficult to answer....Ask one follow up question, if appropriate [not if the student, for instance, has declared that they already have a degree....***

***May I ask what sort of experience of academic writing you had before you undertook this module?***

***For tutors and central academics: Don't press this if the interviewee finds difficulty in answering***

### Appendix 12.3: Responses from students

#### **BEN**

Well in I suppose it should in sort of brief terms I would say it's any sort of essay or full length book which is about an academic subject and is written either by someone with an academic job or a student but my main sort of take on academic writing when you say the the phrase I think of books written by people like professors or (*laughs*) fellows of colleges...that sort of thing. The sort of book that would become set books with a course....So for instance I did a history course two years ago and one book which stands out in my memory (*laughs*) is one by Peter G. Wallace called *The Long European Reformation* which is I think a sort of a prime example of you know academic writing style [Interviewer: *So what would you say is academic writing style then? Or what would you say comprises it?*] Oh well I think I'm sort of talking as although I've done the OU courses I'm sort of talking more of really a general reader more than a reader of academic books and I usually sort of think of academic work as you know long sentences explaining fairly complicated ideas and with a lot you know of factual evidence...to support their arguments. That's how I sort of think about academic writing.

#### **MARTIN**

That's an interesting question to start with. (*laughs*) Academic writing within a course of study. And by 'academic writing' I have come to realise that that means I have to demonstrate with my writing that I have understood and can disseminate facts as well

as give some demonstration of the facts as well as give some interpretation of the facts...to illustrate that to other people.

## **JULIE**

Ah that's a good question. I think I learned what that meant when I did the English course in so far as I not really to do with my opinion of things. It's to do with gathering together evidence from various writers in the field...and then analysing whatever the topic is by that means.

## **DAWN**

It means writing in a form that it's technically publishable really with attention to with information being backed up by evidence...and you know a sort of literative manner.

[*Interviewer: Can I ask what you mean by "in a literative manner"?*] I mean not using text-speak, for example (*laughs*)....Writing in a coherent sort of not a colloquial way but in a way that's that's serious and grammatically correct and well-structured and with a clear line of argument.

## **ROSE**

Academic writing?...Well it's the opposite I suppose to writing in the vernacular or in everyday language to me it you know employs perfect grammar, perfect wording and some very obscure wording which I find difficult to have that thrown in amongst a study book....So academic writing is challenging

## **TOM**

For me, it's almost like a different language because it's not the way that we're speaking now. It's more you write in a way that's supposed to be as clear as possible...without any ambiguity....It's a very precise way of writing formally. If I was just writing just a normal email to someone you know a normal family member it would just be how I speak...but the academic writing...that's quite far removed from the way that I normally speak...and I've got to really think quite carefully about what I'm writing and I usually edit it you know yeah quite heavily you know? *[Interviewer: So any special features of academic writing that would be different to say other writing like you mentioned an email?]* Probably the language that you use...you tend to use words that you wouldn't normally use and I kind of look at the words to make sure they it's exactly what I'm trying to say....So the thesaurus and the dictionary come in real handy at that point....But I think that for me that this is the biggest thing for me making sure that the words that I'm using...are actually the words that I'm trying to say.

## **PHIL**

I suppose academic writing means to me anything that has a relevance within the realms of academia. I suppose...anything related to colleges, universities, to do with studies and looking into more detail I suppose into you know anything scientific or you know art-related, humanities anything digging in deeper I suppose which you would normally see in an academic background rather than outside of that.



## CARL

What do I understand by academic writing?...Well I think academic writing is writing that is couched in a sort of impersonal way and it basically I suppose academic writing is aimed at making a contribution to a body of knowledge about a specific subject....And I think it needs you know probably needs to be written in a certain way and properly referenced etcetera. [Interviewer: OK. What sort of "certain way" would you be thinking of? What do you think comprises "certain way"?] Well I mean I think that as far as I'm aware academic writing is it's impersonal it's written in the third person it's not about one's own sort of beliefs or one's own opinions it's about the formation of arguments to support something that one might actually believe but essentially it's designed to be shared with other people sort of academics who sort of understand the subject so I think basically one is sort of giving information to academics at a similar level.

## MARY

Academic writing. That is quite an interesting question because as you can probably tell I'm not a native speaker so academic writing [Interviewer: I couldn't tell] (laughs) Well you know now...academic writing. Well, writing in an academic context basically I would define it as...very briefly...so writing about academic topics...and content and in an academic context, i.e. for people who are involved in the subject you're writing about not for (inaudible) if you like.

## Appendix 12.4: Responses from tutors

### **ANDREW**

Academic writing?...Well I think it means writing something that probably involves research and is going to be you know a particular kind of register and is going to be read by other people to ensure it's of an appropriate standard.

### **JOHN**

Oh that's interesting. Academic writing. Personally I see it as a sort of a fairly broad group of generic forms of writing...which are distinguished I think by a degree of formality...the use of register based terminology...and I suppose within the formality and refraining from casual terms. Terminology often I think that it's used in a way which had argument; so it's a form of the language itself and the formality of the language and the purpose to which it's used in being perhaps analytical and argumentative. I don't think I've missed anything.

### **CATH**

I would say using the right kind of register for the right sort of level of formality using the structuring your writing in such a way that it has a sort of clear argument that addressing the question and also kind of using some of the academic conventions such as referencing.

## ALICE

Academic writing OK. Well it would to me it covers a variety of text types if you like...So not just essays but also personal reflections and and oh gosh I can't think of anything else at the moment...reports and so on so it's a variety of types of writing and it would be marked at the more formal end by what perhaps we may consider a more formal academic writing style but it could which would be objective, neutral so-called...and all the rest of it but on certain other types of writing it could be much more personal in terms of personal reflection to be honest I've never done one of those with the Open University courses I've tutored...but we've had more personal writing for example in U214 the current the current presentation of U214 [Interviewer: *Have we? What sort of* Well, I was thinking about the TMAs one and two I think of the current presentation where they find...Where they find their own term and talk about it (*laughs*)...and where it is I know it is a kind of a mixture, isn't it?...but it's got much more possibility to talk personally about it...[Interviewer: *Yes there is, yes, there is yes, that's right and that personal writing wouldn't be in academic writing generally, is that what you are saying?*] I would say not but I know that there are other views on that so I am I am fairly careful when I say to a student you know "be careful about being too personal or appearing to be too personal and subjective in your comments" in say an essay...because not all people will appreciate it and I also generally say to them that you know "be personal when you talk about examples from your own experience say for example I have noticed such and such but try and avoid expressing opinions personally you know I think, in my opinion I feel that" (*laughs*) "avoid those kind of expressions for opinions. Try and find a more neutral, more objective...when expressing opinions."

## **VERA**

It's writing for academic purposes, writing for a University and it's writing done by people who belong to a particular community which is the academic community...and therefore follow certain rules to do with all sorts of things. I don't know, for example, good academic practice and all that is related to that which is commonly is called plagiarism is related to referencing and so forth and use of sources. It's related to structure, the way you structure your particular text, your writing, all fall within a certain genre, depending on the field you belong to and style, the grammar you use you know all...the way you present your text. All these things are related to a particular community of which you are part and therefore you follow certain conventions that allow your text to come across as clear and as authoritative as you know as really belonging to the speech community of which you are a part and obviously it takes time to get into, to enter this speech community so people take some time to develop these skills and understand exactly how it works but it's not any different from any other you know in terms in general terms it's all about becoming part of that community and therefore following the rules. Let's call them the conventions...of that speech community which is that of the people who operate in the academic field anywhere in the world.

## Appendix 12.5: Responses from central academics

### **ALEX**

Wow that's a huge question...We're talking about an appropriate approach to responding to the task set and presenting it and yes it's more than just the writing process...but there are expectations in each discipline about what kind of writing and what kind of content are appropriate...so I guess in that sense appropriate academic writing is discipline specific...and possibly also task specific because we set tasks that require a different kind of response...but when we talk about problems with academic writing we may just be talking about grammar and spelling we may be talking about content and structure we may be talking about argument construction, evidence of critical thinking that it can be incredibly broad...It can also mean if somebody has violated the norms of academic writing in a particular discipline it can also just mean plagiarism or inappropriate referencing or something like that...It's really, really broad.

### **SAM:**

Academic writing is writing that we do only for an academic audience; it's the way in which students are expected to mimic the writing of seasoned academics...I think we don't have a clear understanding of what exactly academic writing is...And so we use it as a catch all phrase for a number of skills and habits...But because we don't actually know what it is I think we mislead students and they have er a a misguided impression about what they are supposed to be doing so students for example will think it means using complex language...Or complex sentence structures...When actually it's neither of

those things...It's about expressing yourself simply but in a way that is different to a novel or different to other kinds of writing that you might engage with like newspaper articles for example I think what we have to do is to be honest with ourselves about what academic writing is...and we have to have a shared understanding of what we mean by academic writing which isn't easy because I have far too many conversations with fellow academics about referencing which I don't think is the point...I have far too many conversations with fellow academics about whether the personal pronoun is appropriate or not...and I don't think that is the point...I think the point of academic writing is to demonstrate something, that you have assimilated what you have read and that what you have read has changed your world view...and that level of criticality is something that's very hard to understand you kind of know it when you see it...but if you say...You know what is criticality? Then the only way that I could show someone what is criticality is by giving someone an example of it.

**PAT:**

So for me so we're looking at this from the students' perspective or just in general what...[interviewer: in general]...OK. So academic writing to me is writing in a way that is where you are identifying a specific question and where you are trying to answer that question with evidence that is clearly presented and testable in some way...So it's about answering a question, collecting evidence, testing that evidence out and putting it in a way that other people can see the thinking behind your argument and can test it out in some way. So in one sense that does not require sets of academic conventions but I think it leads itself to a set of academic conventions...that helps people who are starting out if you like...to articulate their thinking in a in a certain way.

